

EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

Enhancing Student Employability Through A Team Exercise On A Visitor Attraction Management Module

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Summary

Given the pace of recent developments in the tourism industry there is a growing need for universities to produce tourism management graduates able to manage change. Having the requisite skills set makes them more employable. This case study highlights a team exercise that forms one mode of assessment for a first year undergraduate module on an Honours Tourism Management programme in order to show how employability skills of students may be enhanced by building direct contact with tourism employers into modules and the wider curriculum. The content and delivery of the *Managing Visitor Attractions* module at Bath Spa University (BSU) is outlined in order to demonstrate how this assessment item links to the learning objectives and the aims of the programme in general. Overall, the coursework for this Geography module is designed to help students gain valuable experience as well as confidence by dealing with tourism managers in their business setting and learning about the many challenges facing them. In short, this module makes employability-related learning more explicit within the curriculum. The team exercise provides an opportunity for students to enjoy meeting tourism managers while relating what is learned in class and through reading to their work in a field setting.

Objectives

The *Managing Visitor Attractions* module at BSU is designed to provide subject knowledge drawn from lecture and seminar material, case study field work, assigned readings from a required text (Swarbrooke, 2002) and other published or unpublished sources e.g. journals, industry documents, visitor data. The learning objectives of the module include the development of students' appreciation of the scale and scope of the visitor attractions sector of the tourism industry both in the UK and abroad. Upon successful completion of the module students should also be able to grasp how visitor attractions are managed, appreciate the role of visitor management in providing a satisfying visitor experience at attractions, identify and describe some of the major developments that have occurred in the attractions sector and understand the importance of effective marketing, quality and high service standards to the visitor attractions sector.

The learning, teaching and assessment methods that are embedded in the programme's curriculum have an impact on student employability. Building employability skills into modules and the programme overall meets several objectives:

1. Students are able to demonstrate their current level of skills acquisition;
2. Teaching staff are able to assess students' current skills sets so that

feedback and additional tasks may be designed to develop them further;

3. Students interact with tourism professionals in their work setting and thereby understand better the industry context and establish valuable contacts;

4. Students broaden the skill base on which challenging, lucrative and interesting tourism jobs depend; and

5. Students are better prepared to compete for jobs and undertake a tourism career.

Rationale

The Tourism Management BSc (Hons) programme at Bath Spa University is committed to enhancing student employability. This is achieved through careful curriculum design including relevant field work, Personal Development Planning which entails a work placement in Year 2, and involving industry in student learning where appropriate. The programme encourages direct contact with tourism businesses and employers during each phase of student learning. This valuable contact provides a foundation for their understanding of the work environment. It goes beyond the curriculum by allowing students to see the management context in industry.

Students often benefit from a range of industry links made on tourism management degree programmes. Typically these links include liaising with tourism industry professionals when designing a tourism management curriculum, hosting guest speakers in class, teaching materials that reflect knowledge and insights gained from industry consultancy work and hosting departmental research symposia, conferences, workshops or other gatherings that allow students to meet and interact with tourism professionals.

Our programme aims to develop a broad range of skills that are desirable to employers. Various attempts have been made to categorise skills given the broad range they cover. For purposes of discussion, key skills encompass oral and written communication including presentations, numeracy and data handling, the command of computers and

information technology (IT), reading ability, listening, time management, observation, problem solving, critical analysis and individual and team work, though there are others.

It takes time to develop skills that make students more employable. While a programme approach is needed to foster student employability, individual modules may set specific tasks that enhance the pace at which skills development occurs. This case study highlights student field work in the attractions sector, thus illustrating how benefits may be gained from direct tourism industry contact and experience, at the module level.

Context

There are roughly two million people employed in tourism related jobs in the UK. According to a recent report by the Tourism Skills Network South West (2003), the tourism industry employs more than 40,000 people in the West of England and generates £1.4 billion per year for the local economy. The Network, which was established in 2001 through a South West of England Regional Development Agency initiative, promotes the productivity of tourism establishments in the region. They commissioned a survey of local tourism businesses and the findings identified a skills gap that needs to be addressed if the industry is to remain prosperous. The skills that are in short supply include disability awareness, customer care, information technology (IT), supervisory/management, sales, first aid and health and safety. Tourism graduates are encouraged to develop the skills sought by industry in order to fill the gaps. The report noted that the problem may be exacerbated by the competition from other job sectors for candidates having transferable skills. How universities prepare tourism graduates to enter the workplace therefore remains an important factor in this equation.

Given the growing number of university graduates in the UK, the development of a wide-ranging skill set is essential to gaining employment in the tourism industry's competitive job market. Subject knowledge may not be the main pre-requisite for employment in the tourism industry as relevant knowledge may often be acquired in the workplace. Employers

value not only work experience, but problem solving abilities and insight into the many complex issues facing organisations. It is therefore important to incorporate industry experience in the tourism management curriculum in ever more creative, interesting and useful ways.

The study of Tourism Management is interdisciplinary in nature. As a result, Tourism Management programmes are offered in different departments within universities. Some are located within a Business School while others are organised through a Department of Geography, Economics or Leisure Studies, to name but a few. The location of the programme within a university has a significant effect on the approach taken to the study of the subject. This has implications for the skills that are developed on a given programme and opportunities to link the curriculum with industry. At Bath Spa University, the BSc (Hons) in Tourism Management is offered as a specialised award within the Geography Department of the School of Science and the Environment. A geographical approach might consider tourists, destinations and host populations and the tourism industry in a spatial and temporal context placing emphasis on field visits. Geography Departments are well known for valuing field studies highly. Consequently, field work is often granted considerable resources, which suits the subject well. The value of field visits to academic and practical learning should not be underestimated. They help reinforce what is learned in the classroom and through reading, allow students to observe with their own eyes and make valuable connections as a result.

Our undergraduate Tourism Management programme employs a modular scheme, with compulsory and optional modules offered through the Departments of Geography, Business and Management, Professional and Academic Development, Food Studies, Environmental Management and Sociology. The academic year is divided into two 15-week semesters and students are required to take three modules per semester. While a majority of the programme's curriculum is delivered by the Department of Geography, including all "Tourism" modules, many are offered by the Business and Management Department in the School of Social

Sciences. The modular structure is outlined below.

Students on the Tourism Management programme learn in the first semester of Year 1 about the different sectors of the tourism industry including transport, accommodation, catering, attractions, retail travel, tour operations, tourism organisations and financial services on the module *Tourism: An introduction*. They also learn about *The Business Environment* on a Business and Management module. That way, when they are asked to relate their academic learning to industry on the *Managing Visitor Attractions* module in Semester 2 they have a solid grasp of the industry's structure and how each sector fits into the tourism puzzle. The key issues students explore when studying attractions (e.g. customer service, disability awareness, access issues, principles of human resource management, marketing tactics, pricing strategies) are often transferable to other sectors of the tourism industry as well as business in general. The Business and Management module *Introduction to the Management and Functions of an Organisation*, which is the fourth required module in Year 1, further familiarises them with work place principles. The students then choose one option module each semester in their first year.

The *Professional and Academic Development* module is compulsory in Year 2 and is designed to develop further skills that enhance employability such as personal development planning. The module is contextualised to reflect the broad range of student interests. Choices include Leisure and Tourism; Entrepreneurship; Retail, Business and Finance; Creative Industries; Public Administration; Advertising, PR and Marketing; Science and Environment; Health and Society; and Education and Postgraduate Studies. For example, Tourism Management students with an interest in an events management career might take the Advertising, PR and Marketing PAD module. On this module, students arrange a work placement with a suitable agency which provides direct experience in industry along with further valuable contacts to prospective employers. Other required modules include *Tourism Research Methods* which

also entails field work and *Tourism Policy and Planning* which employs a field visit to learn about tourism development plans at the county level. Students therefore have three option modules to select in Year 2.

In Year 3, *Tourism Dissertation* is the only required module and it runs over both semesters. That means students can choose two option modules each semester in their final year. This works well since, by this time, they tend to be much more focused in terms of their academic and career interests and may specialise to some extent. Given our modular scheme, students may follow a variety of "pathways" from Year 1 onward. Among the option modules are *Tourism and New Social Forms*, *Tourism Field Course* (visiting the Amalfi coast of Italy), *Recreation Management and the Natural Environment*, *Enterprise Project and Business Plan*, *Management Tools and Techniques*, *Food Law and Consumer Protection*, *Geodemographics*, *e-Business*, *Marketing Management*, *Employment Law* and *Landscape Heritage*.

The programme is endorsed by the Tourism Society and benefits from active collaboration with local, regional and national organisations. Overall, students undertake a mix of practical and academic work on the Tourism Management programme in preparing for careers in the tourism industry. Given our prime location in Bath and proximity to Bristol many students undertake part-time employment in the tourism industry while enrolled. For example, many jobs are available in the accommodation, catering and attractions sectors and we are approached by local employers for our students as a result. Those who undertake such work and reflect on how the material covered on their modules relates to their industry experience deepen their understanding accordingly.

Description

The *Managing Visitor Attractions* module builds on student learning by focusing on one sector of the tourism industry. I serve as the module co-ordinator of this class which meets each week for a one hour lecture and two hour seminar. The module is assessed through coursework comprising a group seminar presentation

and handout (20%) and a 2000 word essay (40%) and an unseen exam (40%). This case study focuses on the group seminar presentation and handout in order to show how having students establish direct contact with attraction managers helps them gain insight into tourism industry practice that makes them more employable.

Clear and thorough guidance is provided for this team project in the module handbook which is distributed in the Week 1 seminar. In this session, I talk the students through the guidance at length so they can start their coursework. Students form themselves into groups of four and are handed a set of brochures and leaflets featuring local attractions. Each team must identify a local visitor attraction that will serve as a case study. They are to assume the role of consultants to undertake a critical analysis of the management of the attraction they have selected.

The 30-minute team presentation, including five to ten minutes for questions and answers, should include the following content:

- a) An explanation of the historical development of the attraction and its context in the market;
- b) Product range and description, current provision, ownership and management structure at the attraction;
- c) Consideration of the marketing tools employed by the attraction;
- d) Analysis of operational issues including quality, staff training and customer service based on their observations, information contained in publications and/or gathered from management and/or other staff at the attraction;
- e) Discussion of any relevant financial information relating to the attraction;
- f) Presentation of visitor numbers, a visitor profile and/or any other relevant data generated by in-house research, obtained from their interview or contained in reports;
- g) Identification of the key management challenges facing the attraction;

h) Conclusions and recommendations drawn from their analysis of the attraction.

Teams are advised that their analysis might also consider such issues as access, the need for refurbishment, target markets, seasonality, health and safety policies and security. They are encouraged to think about how the key management challenges facing the attraction might be addressed so that it remains competitive. The aim is for students to demonstrate insight into how the visitor attraction is managed, what is being done well and how it might be improved as compared with what the textbooks and other academic literature have to say about what is happening in this sector of the tourism industry. Providing tacit guidance to students to draw upon the literature in conducting their analysis assists them in the process of linking what they are learning in the field to what is covered in the classroom and assigned readings.

The attraction may operate in the public, private or voluntary sector. Their choice needs to be approved by me. No two teams may study the same attraction, nor may they use the attractions we visit as part of the organised field visit for the module. They then contact directly the management of their chosen attraction and request an interview explaining they are studying the management of visitor attractions and wish to learn more about the subject from industry professionals.

The size of an attraction tends to reflect the number of managers that run it. For example, small-scale attractions often have one general manager whereas large attractions may have a large management team reporting to a managing director e.g. operations manager, customer services manager, marketing manager, human resources manager, facilities manager, financial manager, sales manager. If there is more than one manager at an attraction, teams may select the one they most wish to interview. Once the interview is agreed, teams advise me of the name and title of the manager concerned as well as the date of the interview. Teams must secure their interview before selecting their presentation slot. One seminar in Week 7 is devoted to self-directed study to allow

students time in lieu to visit the attraction and conduct the interview.

Teams then design appropriate interview questions to put to a manager at their attraction drawing on information provided in module support materials and a special class briefing on interview techniques in the Week 6 seminar. The students are also directed to visit the attraction and experience it before their interview in order to identify any further issues about which they wish to put questions to management. Once the visit and interview are completed, comparisons are to be made between what is learned in the field and what relevant academic literature has to say about best practice. The exercise aims at providing students with direct industry contact, insight into how visitor attractions are managed and greater knowledge of the visitor attraction product overall. Presentations are made during the seminars in Weeks 10 and 11.

The presentation should include varied visual elements although content is more significant. Presenters are given a group mark, although I reserve the right to award different marks when there is a clear disparity in the quality of the contributions. The work is submitted on disk or CD ROM along with a hard copy version of any material presented via computer or other visual aids, all note cards and a copy of the handout. This includes a complete print out of PowerPoint slides if these are used. The handout for each group's presentation should set out its key themes and content along with a full list of references, using the module textbook for a start. It should not merely be a reproduction of PowerPoint slides used for the presentation. A handout is then distributed to the class before each presentation is made.

This assignment allows a number of skills to be developed and assessed including written and oral communication, information gathering, data collection and handling, team work, time management, use of PowerPoint or other computer software and referencing. However, it is acknowledged that some aspects of employability may not lend themselves to accurate assessment, especially if they are difficult or costly to measure. Clear marking criteria for the group presentation and handout have been established so

students know what is expected and how the assignment develops their skills set which makes them more employable. Students are assessed on their ability to:

1. Provide balanced, clear and accurate coverage relating to the attraction selected and employ a range of relevant sources, key data to substantiate discussion and full citation of sources using the Harvard style of referencing.
2. Provide a well-timed, suitably paced and audible presentation; establish regular eye contact with the audience; interact with audience members and stimulate discussion using clear supporting visual elements with no spelling, grammatical or typographical errors.
3. Demonstrate clear evidence of teamwork and co-operation.
4. Produce a balanced and well-argued response to any questions or comments made during the discussion following the seminar presentation.
5. Distribute a handout for the presentation that contains key findings, along with supporting data and figures that cite relevant sources and a full bibliography of all sources employed.

Students are advised that the handout should have a logical structure, provide a balanced use of information and relevant supporting statements, draw upon a wide range of appropriate sources e.g. books, journals, reports, employ complete and accurate referencing in the Harvard style, use proper grammar, spelling and punctuation throughout and be well presented.

A form was developed for use when marking team presentations. It contains a checklist of the criteria set for the assignment as they appear in the module handbook. This allows me to note which elements of suggested content have been included and whether key points of guidance have been followed. A similar form is used to assess the quality of the handouts. There is room for summary comments at the end of the form.

Peers observe presentations and provide anonymous feedback to each team using a departmental form developed for oral

presentation work. It asks students to identify how the presentation helped them to learn and the extent of its effectiveness. A scale from A (high) to D (low) is provided to rate clarity of aims, quality of explanation provided, balance in terms of depth and breadth, relevance and the extent to which the work is logical, informed and interesting. Further ratings are sought on structure, audibility, pace, sources, quality of handout and visual materials used, ability to stimulate discussion and whether teams field questions well. Students are then asked to suggest improvements and highlight the best features of each presentation. These forms are collected and submitted to the departmental secretary who compiles the data. Peer evaluation results are returned to each team along with the tutor's feedback and their submitted work later in the semester.

Evaluation

This assignment requires students to contact and interview managers in the attractions sector which makes employability-related learning explicit within the curriculum. Students gain direct experience of a tourism product, examine the contents of attraction websites, when available, and negotiate meeting terms. The key skills developed through this coursework include negotiating team work (ensuring all team members pull their weight) and conflict resolution; oral, written and visual communication; computer and IT skills; interview techniques; direct observation of business practices; data capture and handling; critical analysis; time management; and presentation techniques. Other skills may be developed depending on how the project work unfolds. Honing their skills serves them well for future work on the programme and helps prepare them for work in the tourism industry.

Having delivered this module for three consecutive years I consider that most students engage fully with the subject matter, enjoy the work and learn a great deal from the process of approaching a tourism business, meeting an attraction manager and learning firsthand from them about the challenges facing their business. There are personal as well as academic benefits to be gained by undertaking this assignment. These

include satisfaction upon completing a group project, gaining confidence and learning to be resourceful or troubleshoot while in the field. This past year, one student team reported enthusiastically that they were invited to participate in a special costumed event hosted by the attraction on which they focused their project.

Local attractions seem to welcome the opportunity to support our students and learn more about their programme of study. Care is taken to prevent attractions being approached too often, at least by my class, which hopefully results in more managers consenting to be interviewed.

Another advantage of this coursework is that it caters for diverse student interests. Rather than requiring all students to undertake an evaluation of the same attraction, teams are allowed to select an attraction that interests them, which keeps interest levels high. Given the vast array of attractions in the South West of England, especially Bath and Bristol, students have the choice of purpose built, heritage and/or natural attractions or special events. This past semester students selected Bristol Zoo, Bath Postal Museum, the American Museum, Old Wardour Castle, the Jane Austen Centre and Avon Valley Railway.

Not only do students gain vital firsthand experience of industry, they learn to employ observation skills in new ways. For example, by noticing marketing materials, the design, layout and safety features of the given attraction and whether it provides access for the disabled, students are trained to see and experience attractions in new ways. This assists them in their work on the module field trip to the Roman Baths.

The task also allows them to consider the visitor experience from a new perspective. Team findings benefit the class by broadening knowledge of attractions in the area. The handouts provide a bank of case study material on which to draw in their exam and coursework essays as appropriate.

Overall, this assignment makes our students more employable, especially after all teams have presented, because they have a clearer sense of the work undertaken by attraction managers, can

share useful contacts and learn to relate material from the classroom to actual work settings better. Additional benefits include input into career decision-making and knowledge of available opportunities.

The value of field work on a Tourism Management programme should not be underestimated. This assignment encourages reflective thinking, provides useful experience in planning and conducting an interview and collecting data and challenges students to focus their energy and ideas early on in the module.

The use of a form to help me assess presentations ensures that all marking criteria are considered for each presentation. It also helps limit the amount of writing needed to provide useful feedback to students. While the peer evaluation process takes valuable class time to administer, it is deemed to be worthwhile as in many cases fellow students offer similar feedback to that of the tutor. The process also helps students reflect on what works well when presenting and what does not work well. They gain experience looking for specific elements of individual and team performance which helps to reinforce how and why marking criteria are set.

It seems fitting to consider feedback provided by students who have taken the *Managing Visitor Attractions* module. The quotes below are drawn from the module evaluation forms:

“Field work was excellent. Good to meet managers.”

“Field trips and group work have been helpful in this module. Putting theories into practice has been really helpful for me.”

“The experience of the field work was brilliant as you were able to speak to a manager up front.”

“Really enjoyed the module overall. Was delivered extremely well. Favourite module and Year One field trip was good.”

“This module has given me a better understanding of how to manage visitor attractions.”

Discussion

This case study takes a closer look at merely one mode of assessment on a module within a Tourism Management programme that aims at delivering employable graduates. While individual modules and even specific coursework may contribute to student employability, arguably it is the coherence and progression inherent in the programme that may ultimately determine the extent to which graduates develop employable skills.

Careful tourism management curriculum design allows the linking of assessment of field work to some or all of the learning outcomes on a given module. In this case, the group seminar presentation and handout links to all the learning objectives of the module. Feedback on team presentations is provided by the tutor and peers, based on content, style and delivery and encourages improvement and reflection on the learning aims of the assignment.

Student feedback on this coursework tends to be positive which suggests that they enjoy the work and remain motivated to complete the tasks involved. The extent to which students gain insight into attraction management issues will depend on many factors including the role they play within their team, their listening skills, the amount of relevant reading they have done and how much they reflect on what they have learned in the process. What remains important is that we set assignments that allow students opportunities to tie complex ideas together, to observe or grasp an aspect of industry practice and understand it in its management context, as well as in subject-specific terms.

This module prepares students for Years 2 and 3 by requiring them to work effectively in teams, handle data, design and distribute a useful handout, produce interesting text and visual material and compile it in a presentation, critically analyse what they have learned and observed and undertake field work without having a tutor present.

Refinements to the assignment as well as the module are appropriate and inevitable. For the former, possibilities include decreasing group size and increasing the

weighting of the assignment, providing further guidance on work loading within groups and revising the assignment feedback form. Examples in terms of the latter include updating teaching material, changing case studies, discussing relevant newsworthy items in class and changing essay topics or attractions visited. Recent demands on departmental clerical staff may result in the need to adapt the peer evaluation scheme *e.g.* rather than compiling the data, the forms may need to be photocopied and given to students.

Reflecting on current practice and making improvements accordingly allow us to deliver relevant, coherent and useful programmes. It is also vital to keep track of just where we have embedded particular skills within our programmes to ensure adequate coverage and avoid overemphasis. "Curriculum auditing offers a way of testing how and where employability-related learning is incorporated into curricula. It may also point to the need to rethink pedagogic and/or assessment practices" (Yorke and Knight 2004:2) if logical progression through a given programme is to result.

In modular schemes, achieving the right balance for every student creates even greater challenges as no two paths over the three year programme are necessarily identical. A balance must also be struck between efforts expended to develop rounded skills sets that make graduates employable and imparting the necessary subject-specific knowledge that will hold them in good stead.

This case study has shown how the employability skills of students may be enhanced by building direct contact with employers and businesses into programmes and making the employability-related learning that is embedded in the curriculum more explicit. Sharing practice in this way allows staff from different institutions to compare approaches taken to develop their students' employability skills and adapt useful ideas where appropriate and transferable. It is hoped these efforts, taken together, will culminate in the production of university graduates who are well-equipped, prepared and eager to embark on careers in the tourism industry in which they are able to manage change with great effect.

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