

## EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

# Students' Awareness of the Importance of Transferable Skills for Employability

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### Summary

In 2001 the University of Luton conducted a survey amongst its tourism undergraduate students, looking at students' assessment of the skills, knowledge and personality characteristics that they believe will give them a competitive edge in securing employment in tourism. The results showed that we not only need to develop students' skills, but that we also need to take steps to improve their ability to self assess and be aware of their own skill levels. This case study presents the results from the original survey and the subsequent steps taken to improve students' skills awareness and development in order to improve their employability prospects within their intended industry of tourism.

### Rationale

As a result of government policy on widening participation in higher education (HE), the number of degree courses in the UK has increased substantially. Government figures show that 40% of young people go to university (HM Treasury, 2004). This trend is replicated

in tourism courses. The number of undergraduate tourism courses has increased dramatically - from 2 in 1972 (Ryan, 1995) to 80 in 2001 (Busby and Fiedel, 2001). In tourism degree courses:

"...vocational, career and industry issues stand out as the key elements which are stressed in the material that is given to prospective students."  
(Airey and Johnson, 1999, 233).

The increase in the number of tourism degrees indicates students' desire to study a vocational course, leading to a career in tourism. Tourism students should therefore expect their degrees to deliver exactly that – the opportunity to acquire the skills needed to secure a job in the tourism industry. Furthermore, changes in work patterns and a decrease in job security mean that graduates need to acquire the skills required by employers that enable them to transfer from job to job with ease.

"Expectations are, increasingly, built around mobility and change and the anticipation that an individual may move between companies and sectors at a

number of points within a working life." (Baum,1995,190/1)

Transferable skills play an important role in the potential employability and mobility of graduates (Stewart and Knowles, 2000) and should therefore be an important part of the tourism courses provided by universities.

## Objectives

In this case study, we present our findings of the 2001 survey and the steps undertaken by the university to improve students' awareness of the skill requirements they need to secure a job in tourism, in addition to developing those skills within the curriculum. The survey sought to establish whether undergraduate students were aware of the importance of transferable skills and specifically whether they felt they possessed such skills. It was largely based on Purcell and Quinn's (1996) study, and addressed the following issues:

- Why do students embark upon higher education?
- Development of skills and perceptions of employer demand.
- What do students expect to do on graduation?
- Employment expectations.
- Are graduates 'prepared' for today's labour market?

This case study focuses only on the 'Development of skills and perceptions of employer demand'. The population of the survey included all students enrolled on undergraduate tourism related courses at Luton in 2001. The university provides undergraduate tourism courses in Travel and Tourism and International Tourism Management.

## Context

### Reasons for Studying Tourism

To be able to review the results of the study in context we needed to understand students' reasons for studying tourism and whether those reasons reflected their career aspirations. The students were offered a choice of ten statements based on Pitcher and Purcell (1998) designed to indicate their reasons for studying tourism. The statement that generated the highest number of responses (89%) was "I was interested in the tourism industry." followed by "I thought it would lead to a good job in the tourism industry." (71%).

Ninety-one per cent of students were convinced that they had chosen the right course. Reasons given for this included general satisfaction with the course itself (44%), while 58% of students stated reasons relating to the tourism industry and careers. The importance of the vocational/practical side of tourism degrees was also demonstrated by 37% of the respondents choosing "I wanted a mixture of practical/academic course".

Students had chosen to study tourism because of their interest in the subject area and in working in tourism. Yet the career prospects for tourism graduates in the industry are believed to be bleak (Formica, 1996; McKercher et al, 1995; Parsons and Care, 1991; Thomas and Long, 2001). Employers do not believe tourism graduates have the necessary skills to work in the tourism industry (Petrova and Mason, 2005a). There have also been suggestions that that as many as 50% of graduates will not succeed in finding a career in tourism (Evans, 1993).

### Core Areas of Skill Development

The "skills which are required in almost any job", (DfEE as cited in Stewart and Knowles, 2000: 68) are often described as transferable skills. In 1998 the DfEE

listed the following as the most important transferable skills:

- Basic literacy and numeracy
- The ability to work well with others
- Communication skills
- Self-motivation
- The ability to organise one's work
- A basic capability to use IT

The above skills are important to any employer. Kelly and Dorsman (1984, as cited in Ineson and Kempa, 1996: 15) listed the following transferable skills most important to graduate employers in particular:

- Self-motivation
- Enthusiasm
- Effective communication skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Ability to work in a team
- Effectiveness in meeting deadlines
- Interpersonal skills

Luton's skill descriptors identify six core areas of skill development in its graduate programmes; communication, application of number, IT, problem-solving, working with others and improving own learning, which reflect to a large extent the above list. However, there are particular skill needs associated with working in a customer service environment. The skills requirements specific to the hospitality industry (Mayo, 1997: 97) are as follows:

- Service attitude
- Flexibility
- Enjoying serving people
- Management and leadership qualities
- Enjoying what they do

- Dedication and commitment

The tourism and hospitality industries (Baum, 1995: 191) consider the following graduate competencies as most important to them:

- Management of guest problems with understanding
- Effective communication in both written and oral form
- Achievement of positive working relationship with employees
- Professional appearance and poise
- Development of positive customer relations
- Motivation of employees to achieve desired performance

These studies show similarities in the groups of skills requirements and can be grouped (Petrova, 2001) as follows:

- Development of positive customer relations/enjoying serving people/ management of guest problems with understanding, service attitude (Mayo, 1997; Baum, 1995).
- Communication, effective communication skills in both oral and written form (Kelly and Dorsman, 1984; Baum, 1995).
- Enthusiasm, dedication and commitment, enjoying what they do, self-motivation (Kelly and Dorsman, 1984; Mayo, 1997).
- Teamworking, achievement of positive working relations (Kelly and Dorsman 1984; Baum, 1995).
- Problem-solving skills (Kelly and Dorsman, 1984).
- Management and leadership qualities, motivation of employees (Baum 1995 and Mayo, 1997).

- Interpersonal skills (Kelly and Dorsman, 1984).
- Effectiveness in meeting deadlines (Kelly and Dorsman, 1984).

The discussion of and comparison between employers' requirements of transferable skills and tourism students' awareness and possession of those skills were conducted on the basis of this grouping.

**Findings and Discussion:  
Students' Awareness of  
Transferable Skills**

The first aim of this analysis was to determine students' awareness of which of their skills may prove important and/or beneficial in the labour market. The questions posed did not use the term 'transferable skills'; neither did they give a list of skills. In this way any possible influence on the answers was avoided. The questions referred to skills, knowledge, experience and personality characteristics beneficial in securing employment. Table 1 presents the summary of responses:

<b>Skills</b>	<b>% of total respondents</b>
Customer service skills	23%
Communication skills	23%
IT skills	19%
Language skills	18%
Team working skills	9%
Organisational skills	8%
Interpersonal skills	8%
Marketing skills	4%
Management skills	4%
Problem solving skills	3%
Office skills	3%
Leadership skills	1%
Decision making skills	1%

**Table 1: Skills Perceived Beneficial In Securing Employment**

**Customer Service, Communication and IT**

Communication and IT are two of the skills most commonly required by employers (DfEE, 1998). Effective communication skills are amongst the most important skills to tourism and hospitality employers (Kelly and Dorsman 1984, Baum 1995). These skills are also regarded as important amongst Luton's tourism students; 23% and 19% of students cited the importance of communication and IT skills respectively. Development of positive customer relations and service attitude (Mayo 1997, Baum 1995) are considered very important to tourism and hospitality employers; again this was reflected in student responses at 23%.

While it was encouraging that the students were aware of the importance of the three areas cited, response rates to other skill areas were low, highlighting the necessity of raising awareness of the importance of these skills.

**Business**

Skills important to working in a business environment provided an even lower number of responses. The five areas that registered minimum response amongst students were decision-making, office, marketing, organisation and problem-solving. Problem-solving is one of the most important skills to graduate employers (Kelly and Dorsman 1984, as cited in Baum, 1995). This indicated that more emphasis on these skills was required.

**Interpersonal**

Interpersonal skills are also rated highly by employers but generated a low response from the survey. However, students were asked to list personality characteristics that they thought would be beneficial to them in securing employment, some of which do relate to interpersonal skills. Table 2 groups these

characteristics into two categories; 'friendly' and 'outgoing'.

<b>Friendly</b>	<b>Outgoing</b>
Polite	Bubbly
Helpful	Happy
Nice	Sociable
Easy to get along with	Enjoy working with people
Kind	Enjoy meeting people
Approachable	Lively
Understanding	Extrovert
Caring	Positive attitude
Patient	Cheerful
Good listener	Smiley

**Table 2: Friendly/Outgoing**

These personality characteristics could be perceived by students as an advantage in securing employment as they are aware that their future careers may involve high levels of interaction with customers.

Students' awareness of the importance of skills and their own skill levels indicate a number of areas for improvement. Nevertheless, it was encouraging to see that 27% cited dedication and commitment to their future tourism careers.

**Perceived Importance of Knowledge in Securing a Job**

The majority of respondents (68%) stated that their specialised knowledge of the tourism industry would prove advantageous to them in securing employment in the industry. Yet such knowledge is regarded by tourism and hospitality employers as being much less important in comparison to other skills (Baum 1995; Li and Kivela 1998; Petrova and Mason 2005b). Further, Evans (1993) stated that employers are "all supportive of 'general intellect, calibre, personality and fit' being the

key criteria for graduate selection and not the degree subject itself". This highlights the importance of raising students' awareness to the fact that in addition to the knowledge they are gaining, their degree courses are also developing their skills, which will enable them to secure employment.

**Summary of Findings**

The results discussed above show that students have little awareness of the importance of skills to their employability, and that more needs to be done to increase awareness of the skills they have developed during their degree. In the next section we describe the practical steps that have been undertaken within the tourism courses at Luton to achieve this.

**Approach to Teaching and Curriculum Development**

There are two undergraduate tourism courses in the Department of Tourism, Leisure and HRM, based within the Luton Business School, these are: BA (Hons) International Tourism Management and BA (Hons) Travel and Tourism. Both courses offer a mixture of business and tourism modules.

Most of the business modules are taught in Level 1. Students are not always keen on these, especially at the very beginning of their studies. They do not always perceive the benefits of studying business and how it relates to tourism, and often find general business modules more difficult than the tourism options. However, as their studies progress some comment favourably on activities and assessments in Marketing, Business Environment, Business Analysis and Finance for Business that they have covered in Level 1.

We recognise the importance of business skills to tourism employers (Petrova and Mason, 2005a) and our tourism courses are based around these skills. Business modules give the students opportunities to enhance their skills with regards to decision-making, problem-solving, marketing and organisational skills. Interestingly, students find it hard to make the link between these groups of skills developed during the business modules and their importance to employability. We have therefore taken steps to improve the ability of our students to reflect on their skills, namely through the 'Personal Professional and Academic Development in Tourism' (PPAD) and 'Personal Development Planning' (PDP) modules which are discussed below.

As students move on to Levels 2 and 3 the number of business modules decreases, leaving more space for tourism and leisure options. These can be divided into two groups - practical and theoretical.

Theoretical modules are designed to develop general intellectual skills which have always been associated with higher education. They enrich the students' way of thinking, analysis, discussion and reflection. Research Methods in Tourism, for example, develops research and information retrieval skills, as well as analytical techniques. It also teaches students how to use different research methods. Sport Tourism introduces theories applicable to this relatively new area of research, so that students can make a link between theory and their own experience. Tourism Behaviour introduces theories behind behavioural issues brought up by tourism. Sociology of Sport and Leisure is also currently being introduced.

Recently the curriculum was further enriched with a number of new practical tourism modules and initiatives designed

to improve students' employability prospects within the tourism industry. Practical modules are very popular amongst our students. These modules include Airport Services Management, eDestinations, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Tourism, ICT Management, Work Placements, Conference and Event Management and Air Transport Management.

### **eDestinations**

This is a new hands-on practical module which trains students in the use of the 'Tiscover' content management system. Students develop a trial website for both a destination marketing organisation and an accommodation supplier in a fictitious destination. It is taught in an unconventional way, as a 'short and thick' module, comprising an intensive approach where students attend 4 full-day sessions (9.00-17.00), throughout the semester, mirroring a traditional working pattern. Students are then required to work independently on their assessments in order to develop their self-reliance. As it is a module developing IT skills, further assistance from the tutor may be obtained via the virtual learning environment, 'Blackboard' and email. This module is a result of cooperation between the module coordinator and Tiscover, the world's leading supplier of destination management systems. Luton is the first university to deliver this module in the UK. It was previously introduced in Austria where it was branded as 'Tourism Online Manager'. This module equips students with practical knowledge and skills, specifically technical training, how to use content management systems and how to use best practice in the use of new media such as search optimisation, website design and email marketing.

### **Airport Services Management**

This module was introduced several years ago and is based on the ServisAir

training programme, delivered by their staff at Luton Airport. Students who achieve good results on the module are offered summer employment with ServisAir at Luton. Some of them get the opportunity to extend the period of their placement to a full year. Students have commented that this module gives them the chance to experience the realities of working in the industry and to compare it to their own expectations and aspirations. As a result, some choose an alternative career path while for others it is an opportunity to confirm that their career plans are suited to them.

Students who complete a full year's work placement show greater confidence and self-esteem. They become more confident of their skills and abilities to perform in a work environment and gain maturity as a result of their experience.

### **Personal Development Planning**

To maximise the benefits of our courses we need to ensure that students have the ability to reflect on the skills they have developed during their studies and work experience. We have used the QAA's Progress File recommendations to adopt a curriculum model that integrates personal development planning (PDP) with career management skills at all levels of the undergraduate portfolio (Ujma and Kumar, 2005).

As previously mentioned, Luton now has two modules that deal specifically with reflection on skills developed 'PPAD' at Level 1 and 'PDP' at Level 2. PPAD concentrates on the development of academic skills of new students, with PDP designed to follow on. Level 2 students are encouraged to take their development a step further, to enhance their employability skills through interactive exercises, group activities and individual reflection. These processes often pose problems; to facilitate them we have worked closely with the university's careers service

professionals. We believe this has enhanced the quality of our delivery of this module and has improved the ability of our students to reflect on their own skills.

We aim for a holistic approach to our curriculum by combining efforts between all of the modules mentioned. Transferable/key skills are written into each of the modules and play an essential part to the outcomes.. In addition, our students have the ability to take work placements to further their skills, work experience and ultimately their employability prospects.

### **Conclusion**

There are indications from the literature that tourism graduates face particular industry-based challenges when looking for employment. From our own research we found that skills development and self-awareness needed to be further embedded within our curriculum.

In recent years we have undertaken a number of measures to develop comprehensive subject-specific support for skills relevant to the tourism industry. The range of modules we provide within our tourism courses develop, or at least provide, students with opportunities to gain a number of skills, both academic and practical. Examples of this are:

- ICT in Tourism, eDestinations, ICT Management raise the profile of IT skills
- PDP and PPAD evaluate communications skills
- Work Placements, Conference and Event Management and Air Transport Management aid students' reflection around practical issues and learning 'by doing'

- Further skills are developed through activities such as volunteering and mentoring.

PDP aids students' ability to look at their course and skills development as a whole. It teaches them how to assess and apply their skills in a context. This is made possible by the way the module is set up - it teaches students to reflect on modules we offer as part of our tourism courses. To enable this process the Tourism PDP co-ordinators explore the links with other modules within the tourism curriculum, particularly where

there is an emphasis on the development of practical skills and reflection on the overall development of our students. Finally, all through their studies and particularly in the last year of their degree, students are provided with general careers support by the university's careers service.

Most of our students are 'non-traditional', so there is a great need to empower all of them with skills and experience that will help them in their careers, in a competitive and ever-changing market.

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