Practical Learning in Hospitality Education

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CHAPTER 15: CAPITALISING ON INTERNAL COLLABORATION: REDESIGNING THE PLACEMENT PREPARATION PROCESS FOR AN INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE HOSPITALITY PROGRAMME

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Abstract

Work experience in the form of hospitality placements is merited with developing key sector related skills and increasing an individual's potential for future employment. The nature of such programmes has highlighted the need for strong tripartite relationships between universities, students and sector employers, emphasising the importance of external collaboration. However, the pre-placement process can be challenging to navigate due to the need for polished career documentation such as a CV and cover letter and an appreciation of effective recruitment process techniques such as interviewing skills, suggesting that internal collaboration for universities as stakeholders is just as important. For international students choosing to undertake a placement, this can be a steep learning curve if they have no experience of pertinent job recruitment practices and standards of their chosen placement location. In these circumstances, university level support throughout the placement recruitment process is critical in ensuring that placement students are well prepared to secure an interview and ultimately a placement position. Such efforts often require input from academic, placement and career service teams, putting emphasis on having a strong internal relationship. This chapter illustrates how internal collaboration can be leveraged advantageously to support international postgraduate students. By capitalising on the relationship between the academic, placement team and career services, the programme was redesigned to integrate career development skills and techniques. The case study highlights some of the problems and challenges that led to the redesign and implementation of the solutions that extended beyond the pre-placement needs to post placement career development, thus maintaining an equilibrium between academic theory and management practice.

Introduction

A fundamental aspect of practical learning hospitality education is its experiential nature. Placements are a

form of experiential learning that is embedded in hospitality programmes (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012). Such placements, which comprise core parts of international hospitality programmes around the world are also known as work integrated learning (Martin, Rees and Edwards, 2011) or internships (Singh and Dutta, 2010). Work experience in the form of hospitality placements is merited with developing key sector related skills and increasing an individual's potential for future employment. It is an important part of the hospitality education experience (Caterer, 2006). One of the key benefits is that when practical learning is experiential it is highly contextualized and helps relate theory to practice (Lenihan and Sheridan, 2014). Placements can help students gain global competencies and support the internationalisation of study programmes (Becket and Brookes, 2012).

The key stakeholders in placement programmes include higher education institutions, students and industry employers. They rely on mutually beneficial relationships in order to ensure that placement goals are achieved for all stakeholders involved (Yiu and Law, 2012). The student seeks to develop professional competencies and personal attributes linked to employability. In a study conducted by Tse (2010) using content analysis of student responses about internships, it was found that personal growth was identified as the second most significant theme that students referred to in the areas of cultural awareness, interpersonal skills language skills, sense of responsibility and time management. Without insight from students' experiential knowledge of placements any efforts to improve the experience is likely to be disjointed (Huang, 2015). Lam and Ching (2007) stated that a closer appreciation of differences in expectations and perceptions of the practical learning experiences for students could help to improve the quality of tripartite relations. This enables stronger networks between higher education institutions and industry, which in turn helps to inform academic content (Martin, Rees and Edwards (2011).

Tripartite relations are not without challenges (Yiu and Law, 2012). A key issue is the level of preparedness of international students to engage with work place practices, language skills and professional work practices that are likely to be very different to their own home context. Chen (2015), states that for students travelling abroad for placement, training in English language skills, insight into work place practices, professionalism and cultural awareness of geographic locations of placements is necessary for students prior to placement to appreciate work place cultures and cultural awareness of placement destinations. The pre-placement process can be challenging to navigate due to the need for polished career documentation such as a CV and cover letter and an appreciation of effective recruitment process techniques such as interviewing skills.

Placement students benefit from the placement preparation process on CV development and writing of cover letters, placement searches, interview practice and insight into self-assessment tests, psychometric testing and what to expect from assessment centres, (Martin, Rees and Edwards, 2012). Survey results of students studying on a BA Tourism and Hospitality programme at the International Hellenic University in Greece on the experiences of the placement students, revealed that one of the critical areas to still address is the support for students' psychological readiness for the placement period in the workplace (Christou and Chatzigeorgiou, 2019). This finding suggests that the ability to facilitate successful placements within higher education could benefit from leveraging internal collaboration among relevant stakeholders involved with the placement processes. Few studies consider how relations of the key internal stakeholders can contribute to fostering a successful placement process for international students.

Context

The Oxford School of Hospitality Management (OSHM) is a department within the Oxford Brookes Business School at Oxford Brookes University. The school is currently ranked 9th in the QS world rankings and has a strong standing within international hospitality programmes globally (Oxford Brookes University, 2020). OSHM offers a postgraduate placement module as part of its suite of international programmes (Oxford Brookes University, n.d). The postgraduate placement programme attracts a significant number of international students because it provides an opportunity to gain international work experience (Oxford Brookes University, 2019, p.14). The placement module is a one-year work experience period that is undertaken following the completion of a one year taught Masters. Experiential learning through work placements and links to fostering employability for graduates has been a long-standing focus of OSHM and it is reflected in the way practical learning is built into the curriculum (Maher, 2005).

The case study reviews secondary data spanning 2014 – 2018 reflecting on insight from email communication between the internal stakeholders, feedback from placement module reviews, placement workshops and post placement student surveys as well as internal workshop presentations, training material and numerical data. Further information on Oxford Brookes and the Oxford School of Hospitality Management is drawn from the public domain. These secondary sources are used to illustrate the internal challenges and the outcomes. Ethical considerations have been considered in using internal secondary sources that are anonymised. Where evidence has been used, the requisite permissions were sought from the relevant contributors. The focus is on the placement sandwich mode offered on the International Masters suite of programmes at OSHM.

In presenting this case the chapter applies the reflective cycle framework developed by Graham Gibbs (Gibbs, 1988) using the five stages of description, feeling, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. In *"description",* the main case, presents the placement programme structure and the key internal stakeholders. The author was the module leader on the programme from 2014 onwards therefore; *"feelings"* are represented by the personal insights derived in delivering the module. The *"evaluation"* is focused on articulating the key challenges faced and how the pre-placement processes were redesigned. The *"conclusion"* brings together key reflective points on learning and the action plan provides an opportunity to make recommendations.

Programme structure and internal stakeholders

Three key stakeholders are involved in this main case, namely the 'Careers Centre' which, since 2014 is referred to as 'Careers ', the placement office and academic placement module leader. The Careers Services website at Oxford Brookes highlights its tailored support in the following areas:

- one to one drop in sessions with careers coaches
- practical advice on CV writing, putting together job applications and interview skills
- workshops on popular issues such as job searching

- specialist careers coach for international and EU students
- continuing professional development advice once you have left Brookes

(Oxford Brookes University, 2019).

The placement office was instrumental in maintaining accurate data information and relevant documentation for the placement process. The office was also key in maintaining communication lines between Careers, the academic team and themselves. The module leader was the key liaison for students for the pre-placement sessions and the placement year itself. While there was support from colleagues in the academic team, this was a role predominantly driven by the module leader.

The placement module is a one-year programme that is undertaken in the second academic year of the sandwich mode programme. In order for students to be work ready all the pre-placement support, bar the induction, is carried out in the first year of the taught Masters programme. The first year of the Masters is structured around a 12-week timetable with exams running in the 13th week. Due to the need for students to start their placement on time in the second year, the pre-placement support is time sensitive and has to be delivered in the second and third semester of Year One. The pre-preparation placement support is critical to increasing students' chances of a successful placement. The placement programme seeks to foster a range of benefits for postgraduate students as summarised in Table 1. In order to ensure placements are successful practical learning experiences, the workshops involve a combination of job search techniques, skills based workshops and interview practice to name a few.

Table 1:

Source: Oxford Brookes University, 2019 p.14

Beneficial Placement Outcomes	Pre-Placement Skills Development
Paid full time work experience Practical experience in the hospitality, tourism and events industry	Developing job application competencies such searching for and using desired job descriptions to learn how to tailor their CV to the right audience.
Dedicated guidance on placement search Tailored placement skills development workshops	Reviewing CV's and CV formats that are relevant to the UK recruitment standard
Continual support from the school	Writing cover letters
Improved graduate employability	Interview practice and undertaking a skills audit for employment

Delivering the module

The placement programme numbers between 2014 and 2018 grew from 18 students in 2014 to 48 students in 2018 reflecting an increase of 166% over this period. The increase was gradual between 2014 and 2016 and working with smaller numbers ranging between 13-20 students. The significant increase occurred between 2017 and 2018 to 42 and 48 respectively (Oxford School of Hospitality Management, 2014 – 2018). The students represented nationalities from geographic regions of Central and South East Asia,

North and South America and Africa. Working with a range of different nationalities was rewarding in the opportunities this created for gaining insights into the diverse cultural contributions and limitations in relation to language, knowledge and work experience that the student came with onto the placement programme. The module combined students with first degrees in hospitality and students on a conversion programme that attracted students from different disciplines such as nursing, dentistry, and engineering.

Figure 1 shows, the simplified placement process stages from registration to completion. Step 1 involves regular communication between the placement administration team and academic team ensuring students are registered for the module. At this stage record keeping of sector interest and previous sector and non-sector related work experience prior to the programme was critical. The data held by the placement team became critical to regular communication about placement updates sent out to students. In Step 2 the students are supported in interview practice focusing particularly on identifying what competencies they already had and could be linked to the relevant sectors; for the conversion students, the focus was on what competencies they had that could be transferrable to the hospitality, tourism or events sectors. At this stage, students need clarity about the placement process and insight into what job roles are possible and therefore interviews would run for 15- 30 mins. As module leader, it is critical at this stage to assess the level of support the students' need based on their experience at that particular point in time. In Step 3, a series of workshops is carried out focussing on CV writing, cultural awareness, employer expectations in the UK in relation to CV format, content and structure. Step 4, involves the confirmation and engagement with the one-year placement. In Step 5 students complete the placements. Final completion involves the submission of an assigned project work.

Figure 1: OSHM Postgraduate Sandwich module: simplified placement process model

The approach of giving students some interview practice was combined with the opportunity to gain some knowledge about the strengths and limitations that students had in relation to placement applications. They are asked a series of questions, such as: "why are you passionate about the hospitality industry?", "what type of companies are you interested to work for and why?", "what are your expectations of this placement job role?" and "what do you think makes for a successful job role?" By responding to the questions, students have the opportunity to practice their language skills and appreciate cultural differences such as eye contact and voice levels.

In terms of Step 3 pre-placement workshops were designed to run for three hours with one comfort break. The content focused on identifying transferable skills, understanding what employers are looking for, how to go about preparing the most relevant sector CV, using job descriptions effectively for CV development and interview practice, setting the scene in relation to professionalism in the interview, tips for interview success, concluding with placement information and questions. The workshop included interactive sessions such as a paired 20-minute Icebreaker where students swap CV's and take turns to describe themselves. Thereafter, each partner reviews their colleague's CV to identify to what extent the self-description is evidenced in the CV profile and content. Such practical exercises helped the students to practice speaking. When observing another student speaking, students were able to notice body language and intonation offering peer feedback that they could use to improve their interview techniques.

Challenges faced

Prior to 2014, the postgraduate student's pre-placement preparation was largely driven by the OSHM academic placement team. There were three key challenges that we faced concerning time as a resource commitment, how to support the conversion students with non-related skills evidence and understanding different cultural work practices.

Time as a resource was one of the most significant challenges faced in terms of Step 2. The practical pre-placement preparation such as CV feedback and interview practice to determine skills set and respond to student's initial queries had to be carried out outside of normal teaching contact time. The individual one-to-one interviews that were manageable with 18 – 20 students proved to be more time consuming as the student numbers increased to 48. While the placement interests and registration data could be attained through other means, student feedback in the module guide of 2014 provided below revealed the importance of retaining the practical placement supportive elements if students were to be successful in making the placement applications.

"The lesson for future students is to ensure that they fully understand what is required of them in their placements before they start and that they will cope with the nature of work. They therefore should prepare in advance, about those things that they think are important for them to deliver satisfactorily and which are likely to affect their work." (Anon, 2014) This meant that we had to reconsider how to give students the opportunity to continue to have one to one support.

The second challenge that arose was identified through the student interviews was that students on the conversion programme needed significant support to reposition themselves from their non-hospitality related education to hospitality, tourism and events roles that required distinctive sector related competencies. This refocused our need to identify key transferable skills within their existing experience and education. The third challenge was regarding cultural appreciation.

Leveraging internal collaboration

There were some significant advantages for OSHM in undertaking all the pre-placement training for

students within the OSHM department. We had direct access to a database of sector job descriptions from previous student placements and we had contemporary knowledge of the sectors based on our historical links with placement employers and industry alumni through the Bacchus Mentoring Programme. We were also closely involved in preparing the students and helping them find placements, which kept us closer to our industry employers. However, with the increasing student numbers we had to consider the nature or the delivery and ensure that we could still be attentive and responsive to student's placement needs.

At the request of the academic team, there had always been input from Careers to provide students with careers' support. However, this was not specifically embedded into the postgraduate placement process. The student feedback summary showed that for international students, choosing to undertake a placement could be a steep learning curve if they have no experience of pertinent job recruitment practices and standards of their chosen placement location. In these circumstances, making the careers' support component an integrative part of the placement process was critical to ensure that placement students were well prepared to secure an interview and ultimately a placement position. As the numbers increased, it was clear that such efforts would require a closer internal collaboration between the academic team, Career Centre and the placement administration team.

In September 2014, Careers approached the department offering an increased level of support. The team had developed an extensive programme of workshops and information sessions and was looking to embed, where appropriate, careers support within different programmes delivered by the School. Staff were also continuing their usual programme of one-to-one drop-in sessions for career related issues on the different campuses. This initiative presented an opportunity for us to capitalise on an internal collaboration by using our database of placement resource information and the careers input through workshops and the one-to-one sessions. In 2005, the restructured programme in OSHM to a semester timetable (Maher, 2005) meant that we had 15 years of data we could draw on identifying some of the key areas of limitation for the postgraduate placement students and where they needed selective intervention.

The collaboration from 2014 was strengthened through a series of meetings between Careers and OSHM. As a result, we were able to develop combined workshops that focused on CV development. Critical to this workshop was also wider recruitment insights such as the legislative requirements on what does not need to be on a CV, as in some cases this was culturally different, for example through the use of photos indicating gender characteristics. Therefore, the objectives of the workshops were expanded to include understanding UK employability factors, knowledge of CV's for the UK employment market and raising awareness of career resources available. Subsequently, there was also a greater emphasis on including the use of LinkedIn as a professional footprint within the workshops due to the increasing use of LinkedIn by recruiters to view professional profiles of individual candidates.

Efforts to embed the careers' workshops within the module were enhanced through administrative efforts of the placement administrative team. They were critical to maintaining strong communication links with Careers. They were instrumental in ensuring the meetings that students needed to attend were on student calendars, giving the Careers team access to the job descriptions and necessary information to create the bespoke workshops. The new format meant that we were able to schedule the careers team into the semester schedule at specific key points in the semester to ensure that student CV's were done within the scheduled time.

Outcomes

In reflecting on this case, the critical learning was being able to leverage the strengths of key stakeholders. The placement administration team armed with data, information and communication efficiencies were able to ensure that workshops ran to schedule and that students submitted and returned relevant documentation on time. The collaboration also helped us to understand where the individual unit pressure points were. The feedback from the students that attended the workshop indicates that they were successful.

The postgraduate students were more informed about what the Careers has to offer and having the opportunity to engage with the students directly gave the Careers team more specific knowledge about OSHM students and their placement needs, which they were able to feedback to career coaches. Careers also leveraged their strengths by increasing the level of communication with OSHM about bespoke workshops and training. In email communication to module leaders dated December 2016, Careers stated that 24 workshop sessions were arranged for the Business School (incl. OSHM) in Semester 1 of 2016, and the students attending these workshops increased by 63% between 2015 and 2016 (717 to 1,169). In addition, 98% of students surveyed would be happy to recommend workshops they attended to others. In email communication of December 2020, with an OSHM postgraduate placement student of 2018, she highlighted that, *"for a lot of us, international students, we had various formats of CVs from our home countries which did not meet UK recruitment standards, so it was extremely helpful to have those sessions to update our CVs and cover letters"*.

From an academic perspective, a key outcome of this internal collaboration was that it has created an opportunity for the module leader to initiate a post-placement workshop for the postgraduate students. The student feedback suggests that the pre-placement support can be impactful. However, while this had a positive impact for some students it has revealed a gap in linking students' placement experience to future employability. Therefore, Step 5 has since been redesigned to incorporate a postplacement workshop involving contribution from both OSHM and Careers. The post-placement workshop takes place three months before placement end due to students having different end dates on their placement contracts. At the workshops, students are able to identify what key competencies they had developed and how to build this into a new CV post-graduation. By introducing the post-placement workshop, there have been benefits to this new structure. It has enabled us to increase our student feedback as well. The OSHM module review reports compiled by the module leader showed an increase in student feedback from 22% in 2016 to 47% in 2018. The post-placement workshop has also created a route by which students not only reflect on their placement achievements but they are able to use the workshop insight to graduate with an updated CV enabling a starting point for a more sustainable approach to their professional development.

The case study has shown that the experiential knowledge acquired from students' engagement with the placement support process can offer very useful insights to ensure that OSHM can continue to make a positive contribution to the tripartite placement relationships. Gaining a more in-depth understanding of students' expectations and challenges helped to improve the quality of placement support delivery. The case study has also shown that students' practical learning experiences are not only beneficial for tripartite relations involving external stakeholders but can be beneficial for internal collaborations as well.

The specific collaboration with Careers highlighted how the internal university expertise can be leveraged effectively when this is incorporated within the module delivery process. It required significant flexibility and regular communication in order to foster a seamless delivery of support services from the placement, academic and careers teams.

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