What's the point? An analysis of the work placement agenda in Tourism Higher Education

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Work placement is growing in importance in both undergraduate and graduate curricula. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are therefore increasingly considering ways of incorporating work-based learning into their programmes (Jones et al 2014). Work placement has been an integral aspect of tourism degrees and is typically designed to enhance programme offerings and provide students with real world industry experience in their field of study. Research shows (Beggs et al 2008, Busby 2003 & Walo 2001) that these experiences can be transformational and enable students to gain practical specialist skills, as well as personal development skills in terms of their attitude to work and life in general.

Nevertheless, tourism work placement opportunities are often challenging to secure and manage in a way that meets the requirements and satisfaction of all parties involved. As often lamented in the literature, tourism degrees are usually offered within a diverse range of disciplines (Busby & Fiedel 2001, Airey & Johnson 1999 & Cuffy et al 2012) from one institution to the next. Further, another common problem cited is that programmes are generally designed as joint degrees and often lacks a core body of knowledge and relevant curriculum.

Tourism placement programmes normally range from 3 months to 6 months; may be national or international; and pursued either in the second or third year of study. Further, it is not unusual for students to be placed in sectors outside their area of personal interest, and offered placement opportunities more aligned to the emphasis of the combined degree programme. As such, this paper questions the work placement agenda in tourism degrees and suggests the need for a more reflective and collaborative approach to programme design and delivery from the perspective of all key stakeholders – the university, the industry and most significantly the student.

The paper argues that the traditional approach to work placement fails to address the lifelong education and training needs of learners (see Cuffy et al 2012) and to equip them with higher level graduate attributes (Jenkins 2009). It therefore seeks to offer a more dynamic and relevant approach which not only allows the development of students' graduate skills but attempts to adequately prepare them for life beyond 'work', addressing more of the higher level developmental and critical learning skills (Barnett 1990) arguably lacking in current approaches to tourism placement programmes. Accordingly, the paper proceeds to examine tourism work placement programmes in relation to the Scottish context.

Student Engagement

Scotland boasts of having an approach to student engagement which is unique and pioneering and unparalleled in the world (Student participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) 2013). As such, student engagement is now a key principle and fundamental dimension of establishing quality in Scottish education in HEIs. This new focus in the government’s education policy and the current drive via the sparqs initiative require a shift from merely encouraging institutions, to setting the expectation and where appropriate the requirement of engagement as an integral element of programmes (Scottish Funding Council, 2015, online).
A key dimension is student representation which is embedded at all levels. Among their roles include sitting on committees, negotiating with senior managers and influencing everything from curriculum design, key issues and strategies, and how the institution responds to feedback. Thus, this paper examines the sparqs agenda and favours its adoption within all Scottish tourism degree programmes, and as far as possible elsewhere.

Following on the sparqs approach, within tourism degrees and more specifically, work placement programmes this paper advocates in-depth participation and active engagement in tourism placement programme design, delivery and implementation. Engagement, here is defined as ‘the individual student engaging in self-reflection on the quality nature of her/his learning – the learner as active participant in or as co-creator of learning (sparqs 2013, p. 7, section 1.22). Pivotal to this approach is the ability of students to develop a sense of ownership over their education as a means to developing high achievement. According to the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland (2015, online) there are five key elements and six main features of student engagement as shown in the table 2 below.

Table 1: Elements and Features of Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five element of Student Engagement</th>
<th>Six Features of Student Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students feeling part of a supportive institution</td>
<td>A culture of engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students engaging in their own learning</td>
<td>Students as partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning</td>
<td>Responding to diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal mechanisms for quality and governance</td>
<td>Valuing the student contribution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influencing the student experience at national level</td>
<td>Focus on enhancement and change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appropriate resources and support</td>
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Debatably, the above elements and features of student engagement offer a platform for shaping and rewriting tourism placement opportunities that address students’ career needs, a concept worth further exploration and research.

**Reflective Practitioners**

The question raised in this conceptual paper is how can adoption of the reflective practitioner approach improve programme design and offering within tourism degrees, but more significantly students work placement experiences. Reflection and critical analysis is required to access what specific skills current placement programmes and experiences offer students. What needs to be ascertained is, is it largely biased towards vocational training and lower level learning objectives at the stage of practical skill development or is the majority of programmes offering higher level experiences which seek to develop critical thinkers, strategic leaders and managers of the sector. This paper suggests that emphasis
has been on the former. A further question is, how can students’ placement experiences be rewritten so that they are no longer debatably, tick box processes within tourism degrees. Arguably, work placement experiences should be closely aligned to students’ career path, enabling them to acquire the appropriate industry experience in developing and building on graduate attributes for advancing a professional tourism career while also adding value to the sector. Undoubtedly, tourism programmes through strategic collaboration must offer opportunities for developing industry relevant higher level liberal skills. Surely, HE should focus on creating strategic thinkers, effective managers, highly skilled professionals who can contribute to knowledge development, as well as the future leaders of the industry.

Another area for close scrutiny is how current placement programmes prepare students for future modules and courses as they progress along their degree. An additional issue is how can curriculum planning be enhanced both vertically and horizontally to advance tourism programme offering. Further, how can placement programme packages be rewritten to meet the demands of the industry, satisfy degree matriculation requirements, while simultaneously addressing student’s individual professional career developmental plan (PCDP) as they progress in creating a dynamic tourism career path.

Moreover, analysis is essential in determining how aligned are students placement experiences to their final career destination. Are graduates often in relevant roles/positions in the sector or in completely different fields? Importantly, how close are placement experiences in preparing students for their preferred tourism career. Equally, questions must be asked about how aligned is the programme to HE policies, demands of the core curriculum offered and relevant learning objectives, and the principles of teaching and learning at the level of higher education. Undeniably adopting a reflective approach to practice raises a myriad of far reaching issues, thus, the paper now proffers some conceptual ideas for further consideration.

**Stakeholder collaboration**

Currently, the generally observed ‘university and industry placement relationship’ can be best described as a loose partnership. Predominately, there is a largely top down approach to planning and decision making, with little active engagement on the part of either students or industry stakeholders. As such, this paper argues for a more strategic and active collaborative approach among all stakeholders, one that facilitates a platform for effective curriculum co-creation. Such an approach should be structured and designed to offer a more learner focused holistic and participatory curriculum design process.

The concept of ‘students as partners’, is a key element to effective engagement and participation (Healey et al 2014 and sparqs 2013). As highlighted by Healy et al (2014) students are often engaged in validation processes and often given a voice in institutional decision making but very rarely are they engaged at the level of curriculum design.

Working and learning in partnership heightens an awareness of conflicting priorities and tensions between the different perspectives and motivations of those involved, and it raises challenges to existing assumptions and norms about higher education. [Nevertheless], partnership also offers possibilities for thinking and acting differently, and for effecting a fundamental transformation of higher education. (Healy et al 2014)
In that regard, underpinning tourism curriculum planning and design with strong collaborative relationships among key stakeholders (university, students and industry) set a solid foundation for stronger more effective partnership relationships essential for advancing the idea of active engagement and curriculum co-creation. Figure 1 which follows presents a framework for implementation of student engagement as advanced by Healey et al (2014).

Figure 1: Four stages of student engagement (adapted from HEA & nus 2011)

Consultation:
Opportunities are provided for students to express individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, ideas and concerns.

Involvement:
Opportunities are provided for students as individuals to take a more active role.

Participation:
Decisions are taken by students to take part or take a more active role in a defined activity.

Partnership:
There is a collaboration between an institution/faculty/department and student, involving joint ownership and decision-making over both the process and outcome.

Source: Healey et al (2014)

Following on the above outlined approach and its application to tourism placement programmes, demands the development of a partnership agreement on how the university, students and industry could collaborate to improve the nature, structure, value, quality and outcomes of placement programmes.

Although not represented in the discussions above the importance of equally strong industry partnership cannot be ignored in this process. As alluded much earlier on, the necessity for active participation on the part of industry stakeholders in the provision of ‘quality’ placement programmes is crucial for achieving and delivering relevant and meaningful placement experiences for tourism students. This requires in the first instance, development and maintenance of strong industry networks between the university and tourism sector, on which sustained and strategic collaborative partnerships can be advanced.

Professionalism and graduate attributes

For effective implementation of a tourism placement co-creation approach it is essential that students understand their role as active learners within and beyond their time in HE. Furthermore, successful co-creation requires a seismic shift in approach to learning on the part of students. On top of adapting to the transition from school and/or further education, the responsibilities embedded in co-creation strategies requires students to be continuous self-directed and active learners that can contribute to their career development at the much
higher level skills of liberal and strategic thinking. The core aim is to move beyond employability skills to co-creation of a dynamic programme well beyond basic industry skills.

**Strategic Collaborative Tourism Placement Co-creation Networks**

This working paper now offers, as shown in figure 2 below, a strategic collaborative tourism placement co-creation network model for advancing the student engagement agenda within the context of tourism placement programmes. This serves to address the void in programme offering in HE degree programmes largely biased towards the hospitality sector and/or as discussed earlier is challenged by lack of opportunities for tourism specialised placement opportunities.

Figure 2: Strategic Collaborative Tourism Placement Co-creation Network Model

In marrying the interests and needs of all stakeholders, co-creation allows for a more negotiated learner directed curriculum which acknowledges and is driven by the agenda of students, university and industry. It therefore offers opportunities for collaborative planning (Cuffy et al 2014) that reflects knowledge created out of strategic network relationships. Nevertheless, curriculum design and placement programmes must be grounded in policies and delivery approaches tightly associated with the criteria of tourism degrees, as well as in-keeping with the principles of teaching and learning at the level of HE. Importantly, it is about developing a programme that is closely linked to students’ career goals and that of the industry - a holistic strategic and collaborative planning approach (Cuffy et al 2014) to tourism curriculum that offers effective horizontally and vertically aligned placement programmes.
Outcomes of approach for future development

1. Redesign of current curriculum to allow for implementation of the Strategic Collaborative Tourism Placement Co-creation Network Model both vertically and horizontally across modules and level of tourism degree programmes.
2. Introduction and implementation of a Professional Career Development Plan (PCDP) programme: co-created by students with specialist mentorship from university and industry partners.
3. Development of a competency framework for students along each level of the degree programme in constructive alignment to co-created curriculum.
4. Institutionalising business/industry advisory boards or committees which facilitate active industry involvement in the co-creation process.

These concepts form the basis on which empirical research is being advanced for furtherance of an evidenced based model for possible implementation within tourism HE programmes in Scotland and elsewhere.

References


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