

## **Learning in the workplace: an innovative approach to work experience**

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## **Learning in the Workplace: An Innovative Approach to Work Experience**

### **1. Introduction**

Universities are constantly being challenged to innovate to keep ahead of the dynamic and volatile operating environment. To add value to employability and to society in a wider context, educators must have a thorough understanding of key stakeholder needs, particularly employers, to inform and enrich the curriculum (Barber, Deale, & Goodman, 2011). This paper presents an innovative, flexible, and sustainable higher education model designed and delivered at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), *Learning in the Workplace*. Students spend a semester of their second-year learning and working with an employer. The employer serves as multi-disciplinary learning laboratory where students engage in active experimentation working and learning alongside experienced personnel in a range of roles aligned to their curriculum and degree choice. Rather than completing their modules in the classroom at SHU, the students on this experience develop their learning through hands-on work experience with the employer.

High enrolment growth at universities in western societies, like the United Kingdom, leads to intense competition in the graduate labour market. Whilst the perceived employment of hospitality students increases during their course, their confidence in actually gaining employment decreases (Beaumont, Geyde, & Richardson, 2016). To better enhance the employability of these hospitality graduates, there is a need for more practically orientated education and strengthening of university-industry collaborations (Guermat, Saad, & Boutifour, 2015; Pani, Das, & Sharma, 2015; Wang & Tsai, 2014).

The new approach presented in this chapter is a solution to this dilemma as it presents an innovative way of partnering with industry. This learning experience meets the needs of and draws on the strengths of business, academia and learners. SHU's ambition is to become the UK's leading applied University and it continues to break down the traditional boundaries between the classroom and the workplace. This approach is also a response to key stakeholder demands such as the government, professional bodies and SHU's business partners. The UK Department for Business Innovation & Skills in 2016 called for evidence related to Accelerated Courses in Higher Education. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the UK Government announced plans for two-year accelerated degrees. An article in *The Caterer* (14 October 2016) discussed the need to think differently about how we deliver Hospitality Business Management education and grow future talent.

Furthermore, the neoliberal paradigm shift in academic education indicates that universities should stress less on how to intellectually enlighten graduates but rather develop employable graduates, who are enabled to gain a footstep in the highly competitive industry after their university education (Ali, Murphy, & Nadkarni, 2016; McCowan, 2015). Research in this area focusses on identifying and scrutinising specific skill sets and competencies which are demanded from university graduates in general (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013; Scott, 2014) and more specifically, which factors affect the employability of hospitality graduates, either by establishing "generic attributes" (Moolman & Wilkinson, 2014), the hospitality students perspective (Beaumont, Geyde, & Richardson, 2016), or analysing the perspective of hospitality employers and managers (Alhelalat & Al-Hussein, 2015; Ali, Murphy, & Nadkarni, 2016) on employability.

The Learning in the Workplace programme at SHU is an example of a hybrid work experience provision which has characteristics from both the concept of work-based learning (WBL) as mode and field of delivery conceptualisation (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Credit is awarded for assessment based on a single semester of work with the partner organisation. The programme learning outcomes are generic and address the skills and the competencies required by hospitality employers. The classroom is the partner's property with university tutors facilitating student learning and providing general support for the practice-based knowledge which is developed by students.

This learning experience offers not only an example of best practice in curriculum design and industry partnership but also potential insights into two further key areas in hospitality education research similar to those identified by Kim and Jeong (2018); the use of technology to augment experiential learning experiences for students and the development of graduates' cultural intelligence as they are exposed to international experiential learning environments.

## **2. Literature Review**

Learning in the workplace has been the focus of considerable academic interest for almost 30 years and has evolved over this period through two notable phases. The first was a focus on pedagogy and the second concentrated on how to operationalise WBL with a focus on stakeholder partnerships, assessment and student experience. This literature review discusses the key issues of pedagogy, and partnership with a specific focus on the hospitality literature. The WBL is applied to all learning that occurs within the workplace or arises directly out of workplace interests and frequently overlaps with experiential learning, informal learning and continuous professional development (Lester & Costley, 2010).

A great deal of the WBL literature can be viewed as having an underlying epistemological position, often implicit, relating to whether WBL is a mode or field of study. Costley and Armsby (2007) assert that this difference is essentially whether a degree is granted through WBL with generic assessment criteria (field of study), or by WBL with subject specific criteria (mode of study) which are typically associated with work placements or undergraduate 'sandwich courses'. The hospitality literature is clearly oriented towards WBL as a mode of study with limited contributions in pedagogy (Gruman, Barrows & Reavley, 2009). However there has been a strong focus on the development of partnerships between higher education institutions and employers.

It has been universally acknowledged that experiential learning should be an essential component in any hospitality curriculum. This method of learning through experiences has been proven to be instrumental in stimulating students' interest in the subject under study, improving their satisfaction and fosters the development of a range of personal, professional and technical skills (Snyder, 2003; Kong & Yan, 2014). This approach necessitates a strong connection between industry and academia. Moreover, industry partners place a premium on the competencies, skills and abilities acquired through internships and placement (Petrillose & Montgomery, 1997; Smith & Cooper, 2000; Yiu & Law, 2012). The partnerships between universities and employers feature strongly in the WBL literature. Such partnerships and the depth of the relationship are found to be very influential in the success of UK hospitality programmes (Busby & Gibson, 2010). The partnerships between higher education institutions and employers are critical in delivering flexible, accessible and responsive hospitality curricula and providing graduates with the skills and competencies to be successful in the evolving global economy (Sewanger & Gursoy, 2007; Ferrandez-Berrueco, Kekale & Devins, 2016).

Little consensus exists on the design of hospitality curricula and the core competencies which are required by graduates (see Leung, Wen, & Jiang, 2018 for a comprehensive review of international approaches) and the role required from industry in curricula design (Ali, Murphy & Nadkarni, 2016). Employer involvement in the WBL process has been defined as arm's length; where the university is merely a provider of labour and partnerships, the university and employer seek to develop a mutually beneficial understanding with recruitment fluctuating dependant on employer needs, or strategic alliances where the employer works with a single university in the main and commits to continued recruitment of students over the period of the relationship (Cassells, 1994, cited in Busby & Gibson, 2010, p. 6). Undoubtedly, providing a meaningful and beneficial WBL experience requires a 'unique tripartite relationship between hospitality students, employers, and educators' (Yiu & Law, 2012, p. 392). We

believe that the Learning in the Workplace experience described in this chapter is an example of such a strategic relationship and provides students with a rewarding workplace practice.

Moore (2007) asserts that the university-employer relationship requires clear vision and rigorous frameworks in place to support independent learning to meet the needs of both parties. Reeve and Gallacher (2005) in their call for further research into the forms and effectiveness of sustained partnerships, suggest that universities need to reflect more fully on the nature of the contribution they can make to the WBL process.

While there is broad agreement about the definition of WBL, there is considerable discussion around how universities define their WBL provision (Reeve & Gallacher 2005), with a significant variability in how WBL is operationalised across university programmes and how deeply it is ingrained in curricula. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2019, p.6) subject benchmark statements for events, hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism states 'courses in hospitality have evolved significantly beyond this vocational focus to combine technical, management and scientific disciplines as a coherent whole, while retaining strong connections to industry'. However, Leung, Wen, and Jiang's (2018) analysis of international hospitality curricula concludes that UK hospitality programmes are more business orientated without any specific hospitality industry focus. These contrary views would suggest that there is a need for new and innovative programmes that work directly with industry to deliver real world skills to graduates and there remains space for institutions to innovate in their curriculum design and provision. Most of the writing on hospitality WBL concentrates on work placement or internship but does not discuss structured learning initiatives as identified in the Learning in the Workplace experience.

Criticisms of WBL are infrequent in the academic literature but voiced more informally by stakeholders (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Some of the concerns noted by Lester and Costley (2010) pertain to the lack of substantive curriculum, formal assessments or examinations, the transition of tutors from teacher to facilitator engendered by the WBL process and an associated drop in quality related to the commercialisation of WBL programmes to increase student numbers. These authors further assert that these challenges are not different from what 'can be expected when any new paradigm or method of organising emerges' (p. 569). Our approach provides details on a unique partnership and WBL provision within the hospitality field and demonstrates how these barriers can be overcome.

### **3. The Learning in the Workplace Experience**

The development of Learning in the Workplace allows SHU to offer choice and flexibility to the 'new' generation of learners based on their individual circumstances and career paths. This framework allows SHU's students to spend a semester of their second year of study in the workplace and achieve 60 credits toward their final degree classification. This length of time in the workplace will be viewed as a placement and allows students the accelerated opportunity to complete their studies with work experience in three rather than four years. By successfully completing this pathway, students will receive the additional 'placement' in brackets in their degree titles. Should students desire to complete a further 48 weeks work experience, this opportunity will also be available to them. Students learn through their job roles, tasks and projects related to learning outcomes with guidance from tutors at SHU and workplace supervisors. Each student will be expected to meet agreed job objectives, meet learning outcomes for the Learning in the Workplace module (see below) and reflect on and articulate their learning.

#### *The Framework*

For SHU's students the focus will be on 'learning while working, learning how to do new or existing things better, learning that takes place in the workplace and a 'curriculum' that grows out of the experience of the learner, their work context and their community of practice' (SHU Work Based Learning Framework, p.6).

Learning in the Workplace has the following characteristics:

- Require students to relate theory to practice through critical reflection and from a personal and professional perspective.
- Enable students to take responsibility for their own learning, including its nature, and within certain parameters, its focus and pace.
- Develop innovative learning teaching and assessment strategies appropriate to the workplace.
- Support the professional and personal development of our students.
- Recognise workplace learning as legitimate. Upon successful completing of the work experience and assignments students will be awarded 60 credits of study.
- Allows programme teams the flexibility of implementing Learning in the Workplace in either Semester 1 or 2 of the second year of study or both semesters of the second year of study.
- Students will be able to obtain 'placement' in brackets in their degree titles on successful completion of this pathway.

- Delivery may be adapted to meet the requirements of a placement provider and students. For example, if students are going to the USA to undertake their Learning in the Workplace they will have to complete a minimum of 32 hours of work per week to be able to meet the visa regulations.

The learning and teaching strategy is designed to engage students actively with their acquisition of the skills required of future business leaders. The module enables students to build upon triggers of learning from their work, independent study time, seminars, workshops or professional reviews. Students will be provided with academic support to understand the fusion between the theory and practice to achieve the learning outcomes. It is generally accepted that students learn most effectively when working at their own pace and in their own time (Tullis & Benjamin, 2011).

#### *Learning in the Workplace at Business A*

The framework discussed above was implemented in cooperation with Business A which embodies an entrepreneurial spirit and when fused with disciplined marketing and management experience, leads to creative solutions. Business A was actively involved in the development of this experience and were very responsive partners. Working collaboratively, SHU and Business A designed a cutting-edge Learning in the Workplace programme where students studying for an undergraduate degree in hospitality, tourism or events can spend either semester 1 or 2 of their second-year living, earning and learning at Business A. When the students were on site at Business A, they undertook two rotations each lasting two months and aligned to their degree. The learning outcomes of the existing curriculum were mapped against the indicative job roles: For example, events students completed an events rotation.

Students were given synchronised time off for study which was usually a Tuesday. This enabled students to have the time to meet up for group work and facilitated a virtual classroom with tutors in Sheffield. Support mechanisms were built into the programme for students as listed below. To ensure a great learning experience, students were provided support before, during and after their time at Business A.

#### *Support Prior to Arriving at Business A*

Students are supported with the following:

- Visa support if required.
- Support in helping them to re-let accommodation already committed to in Sheffield.

- Cultural and academic briefings prior to departure.
- A winter/summer induction school. This provided an opportunity for the cohort to form an identity, have an introduction to their academic studies and prepare for their work and cultural experiences. During this time, they were introduced to their tutors, the modules, and the assessments. It also allowed them some time to familiarise themselves with this new approach to learning. Some key lectures relating to the modules were also delivered during this time.
- Students will also complete a health and safety test prior to departure to Business A.
- All other support mechanisms which are already available to students if they were on-site.

### *Support whilst at Business A*

- Induction was on the first day with introduction to the site and programme.
- All students had coordinated time off per week for study and to facilitate group work
- Monthly excursions and guest talks.
- Academic and pastoral support was provided face-to face and virtually.
- A member of the academic team visited close to assessment submission time to provide support.
- Briefings were held with staff at Business A to prepare them for welcoming the SHU cohort and for their roles in supporting the students during the WBL experience.
- Support for students seeking a further placement was provided virtually.
- Stable Wi-Fi and a SHU classroom.
- Reading materials accessible online.
- All other support mechanisms which are already available to SHU students were accessible to these students.

### *Support on return to SHU*

- Reflective session on how their learning has developed their personal, professional and technical skills.

### *The Module*

The module begins with a comprehensive induction/orientation which took place prior to departure. Induction sessions not only provide useful advice and information for students on their module delivery and tasks, but also cover the practical, cultural, and legal aspects of living, working and studying in their host



country. There is also a strong focus on assuring the students that the support systems of the university are still available and accessible if required. As the programme has evolved the induction was expanded to reflect the experience of the students and now includes advice on issues such as managing homesickness and being assertive in the job role. Fundamentally, the induction serves as a team building role as many participants from differing course routes are meeting and working together for the first time.

Students were provided with comprehensive preparation materials which outline their roles and the requirement of self-motivation and management for successful completion of the module. The managers at Business A were also provided with briefing materials outlining their roles as mentors and guides for the students during the programme. The employer was involved in the definition of tasks and projects to be completed by the students. The summative assessment included an analysis of their progress and outcomes in working towards and achieving these activities, and employers were invited to attend the presentation portion of the assessment package and to ask questions and offer feedback in tandem with the academics.

The Learning in the Workplace module is divided into three assessment tasks to ensure the experience is manageable for students and to provide milestones to keep them engaged with their academic work. The assessments require students to investigate their workplace, to source, analyse and discuss industry and academic relevant information and to examine what they have achieved in the workplace, and how strengths have been built upon, using appropriate theories on reflection and personal development.

#### **4. The Success**

Learning in the Workplace is anchored in the philosophy of ‘praxis’, where in this context theory and practice integrate and emerge in the workplace. SHU and Business A were very committed to developing the nexus between the classroom and the workplace. This has been the key to success as both parties share a common vision and are always looking for creative solutions to develop future talent. This programme has also been effective because student expectations are carefully managed. Constant communication with the employer has allowed the SHU team to hone the emphasis on specific aspects of the rotations the students complete and work more closely with Business A on providing relevant roles for the students, so they see the value to their degree and their future careers. To ensure the principles of the programme was adhered to and to ensure its success, investment in the programme required the following:

- Dedicated academic lead and account manager working closely with Business A management, students, academics and student support.
- Modification of the existing curriculum and ensuring the academic learning outcomes are met through the Learning in the Workplace Programme.
- Training of the staff at Business A and academics at SHU to ensure they were aware of the expectations of the programmes and how to support students.
- Working with the students to prepare them for the new mode of work, study, cultural awareness and health and safety.
- Site visits to the employer and visits to SHU by the employer.

Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. They were also achieving better grades because of this experience, on average an increase of 3-5%. Some students' comments are as follows:

*This allowed me to gain a greater understanding of how the hotel operated as an entity whereas before I had never worked in a hotel which will be extremely beneficial to my career. The program also was extremely beneficial for me academically. In my first semester (whilst in the UK) I averaged a 57.75% for my modules, however for my second semester (whilst working in the US) my grade average was 71.25% which is a 13.5% increase as seen in the figure below. I feel that the knowledge and skills that I was learning allowed me to apply them directly to my studies. Furthermore, as I am studying International Hospitality Business Management, the opportunity has given me international experience in which I was able to work in a different culture.*

*I learnt a wide range of skills that will help me in my career, but it also allowed me to grow as a person. The rotational aspect of the work allowed me to work in 5 different departments where I was trained to a supervisor level.*

*During the internship, I was promoted to a supervisor which has become a big stepping stone for my career. Not only by promoting me, but by also mentoring me along the way, I was able to develop managerial skills which will also support me in my academic work in my final year.*

This innovation has also provided benefits for the employer as depicted in their comments below:

*The SHU students bring to the organisation a heightened sense of commitment and enthusiasm, which is contagious among the rest of our staff. These students have evidenced a strong passion for hospitality and the various roles within the industry, as well as the strong contribution each makes to the overall effort of serving guests and creating outstanding memories for them. In addition, they have been eager to share with fellow employees and guests alike their own cultures, and to learn and*

*experience what they can, which has brought a marvelous sense of joie de vivre to the organisation. We are very pleased to be able to work with these exceptional students, and very proud to be able to collaborate with Sheffield Hallam University.*

The success of this innovative learning experience has led to external recognition as it was nominated for two national awards and successfully won one in innovation in teaching and learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

Education, like any other sector, must strive to innovate. In hospitality we can do so by forming meaningful partnerships with employers to maximise the benefit for our students and provide them with the skills to become agile and resilient business leaders. Work experiences are critically important in achieving this. However, for this to add value, such practices must reflect the changing needs of our students and our industry. We must therefore think creatively and seek new ways of delivering valued practical experiences beyond the traditional models. The above case describes an example of how this can be achieved. The aim of the experience is to amalgamate practical learning within the existing curriculum for the development of the next generation of business leaders. It sought to provide students with an international learning experience through working and studying in a different culture. The success of this programme is rooted in the commitment of both the employer and SHU. Such partnerships must be carefully harnessed and invested in to develop maximum value for all in building a sustainable education model for the future.

Future development would revolve around continuing to learn from the process and being open to evolving the induction and the module itself based on feedback from all parties. Further work will be undertaken in widening this programme to other employers, not only in hospitality but in other sectors. The onus should not only be on higher education providers to create such opportunities, but employers should be innovative and creative and take a risk on such types of learning as the long-term benefits accrued can be limitless for their businesses.

As this programme is relatively new, future research will focus on the value of virtual learning and the how this can develop graduates' cultural intelligence. Hospitality is international, and graduates should be able to work across boundaries and cultures. An experience, such as Learning in the Workplace will strengthen their cultural quotient and their ability to be adaptable and flexible. Additionally, research also needs to be conducted on investigating students' deep

learning during these experiences and the relationship to their attainment gap at university and career success.

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