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Case Study

Enhancing Student Learning and Development in Cooperation with our Alumni

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Abstract

Enhancing student learning in cooperation with our alumni is a piece of action research that has been ongoing for five years, this paper reports on the process of research and the key findings from this research. The starting point was an audit of the various relationships we had with our alumni, then a cycle of review and reflection to develop and fine tune strategies over five years as we continue to enhance the student experience. The area that has developed the furthest has been the mentoring system using alumni. Each cycle of research has led to the need for further research, the next cycle of research focusing on the effectiveness of intra-generational mentoring. We would suggest that the methodology offers a potential structure for other action researchers in Higher Education and it is now the method we use in reviewing and enhancing the student experience on a number of fronts in hospitality.

Introduction

The hospitality subject team have had a long and fruitful relationship with our alumni, however this has developed in a very ad-hoc way. The development of an alumni strategy at University level was the catalyst to reflect on the relationship we had with our alumni and how this could be developed further for the mutual benefit of all current students, alumni and academic staff members. The starting point was an event in London where a team of ten academic staff held ten focus groups with fifty-five alumni to explore what they wanted from their ongoing relationship with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). From that point the research has proceeded in a Lewin-type (1958) approach of proceeding in a spiral of steps,

which over time firmed up to be composed of a circle of planning, action, and further fact-finding about the result of each action. As the research became more formalised and iterative a scoping audit was undertaken to identify the key 'touch points' between our alumni and the student experience on hospitality management courses at SHU. The initial audit was via semi-formal interviews with the staff team to identify all the possible points of contact with our alumni, which unexpectedly highlighted fifty-nine different areas of contact. The approach we adopted was one that reflected the researchers' situatedness and context. The concept of social situatedness first put forward by Vygotsky (1962) cited in Costley (2010) had a significant impact on how the research was undertaken, given the interplay between us the researcher and the organizational, professional and personal context of the research. Thus as researchers we were able to draw upon the shared understandings and trust of our colleagues. A key incentive for our colleagues to engage in the process was a shared recognition that our alumni relationships improved the experience of our current students, tempered by the belief that we could do more to develop this relationship to the mutual benefit of all. A key advantage of being inside researchers was our ability to unravel and comprehend the complications and intricacies of the relationships. This is why we have tended to utilise informal interviews and discussions with our colleagues to audit the nature and extent of the relationships. One potential advantage, but also danger, of the approach that we adopted was our own prior knowledge of how colleagues interacted with our alumni. This gave us a good starting point to open discussions but also held the danger that discussions were directed down a route that left some key questions unanswered in that our prior knowledge constrained these discussions within our own expectations. To counter this tendency we have adopted an iterative approach where we have reported our findings back to the team to reopen debates and identify action points which are then fed into the team's strategy to enhance the student experience. The process is still ongoing and the intricacies of the relationship are gradually unravelling creating new opportunities; some of which we report later.

Methodology

As already noted, the methodological approach was action research undertaken by insider researchers with its opportunities and challenges. As part of this research we have reflected on and reviewed our methodological approach with widening reading. A key refinement of the research methodology came from Costley *et al.* (2010) on work based research, who included an 'idealised' set of criteria for practitioner research, by Reed and Proctor (1995,195) cited in Costley *et al.* (2010, 3). Although specifically for health care, Costley *et al.* (2010) suggest that it has a wider relevance for insider researchers in a range of settings and our research experience would tend to concur with their view:

- a social process undertaken with colleagues;
- educative for all participants in the project;
- imbued with an integral development dimension;

- focused upon aspects of practice in which the researcher has some control and can initiate change;
- able to identify and explore socio-political and historical factors affecting practice;
- able to open up value issues for critical enquiry and discussion;
- designed to give a say to all participants;
- able to exercise the professional imagination and enhance the capacity of participants to interpret everyday action in the work setting;
- able to integrate personal and professional learning, and;
- likely to yield insights which can be conveyed in a form which makes them worthy of interest to a wider audience.

Indeed we would go further in that this checklist provided us with a useful framework to ensure the consistency of the research through the iterative process, in particular reminding the researchers of the nature of the experience and avoiding the temptation to follow one's own hobby horses, recognising the ongoing contribution of the community being investigated.

A key challenge of undertaking an insider research approach in an action research environment is to ensure the robustness of the research method in practice. The research needs to be rigorous, while at the same time keeping an element of informality. This will ensure that the intricacies of what are quite often complicated social relationships are fully unravelled, then actioned, to use this new understanding to enhance the student experience in a mutually beneficial way. Indeed, we would argue from the experience of this research that ethical ground rules need to be set in place at the beginning of the research, alongside the more expected ethical considerations such as confidentiality. We wanted the changes in practice resulting from this research to be non-exploitative of our alumni. This was a fundamental canon of the research and had a strong influence on the later iterations of the research as we explored the nature of the relationship from the alumni's viewpoint.

The methodological framework adopted was bricolage, reflecting the need to respond to the complexities and contradictions that emerge from trying to dig deep into social relationships, some of which have been long running. This also recognises that relationships have changed over time, from teacher/pupil to one where the pupil is now regarded as the expert, providing an insight into a new and emerging world to both the old and the new generations. Secondly, the approach reflected the differing beliefs in research philosophies of the researcher's positivism on the one hand and a participatory paradigm philosophy on the other. The end result has been to create an insightful and structured approach which has tended to raise more questions than it has answered. Nevertheless it has allowed the researcher to control and manage the investigation into multiple relationships in a way that

has provided clear and identifiable actions to improve the student experience and identify areas for further investigation.

The initial audit eventually involved the whole Hospitality staff team of twenty-two members. The process was one of a snowball sampling in that an initial enquiry led to a comment which led to another staff member and so on. Very much a growing spiral of steps to unearth the existing relationships with our alumni, enquiries tended to be in the nature of a request for information in a very informal way. As the data grew it became necessary to structure the nature of the relationships with the alumni. From the researcher's discipline background of economics it seemed obvious that the way forward was to build models. These would better explain, and aid understanding of, the relationships by grouping them into particular types, then into terms of future actions which might be followed to improve the student experience. The models or frameworks were then used to report the findings to undertake the next stage of the research, in particular identifying research priorities, these being further developed by an interactive process with involvement both from academic staff and the alumni. Writing this paper created an opportunity to reflect on this research process, which has been ongoing over a period of five years. The fundamental process of identify, review then action and reflect and discuss, is now part of our standard practice within the subject group and is used almost automatically by the staff team as a whole. For example, we have, or are using, this basic approach to review the subject matter within all modules, including the employability strand, and are currently experimenting with student feedback sessions after supervised work experience. Two observations are worth making; one is that during the five years we have a number of new, young staff who are heavily engaged in the process of action research using this 'simple structure review then action and reflect and discuss'. Secondly, linked to this approach is the implicit belief that changes should be based on a robust evidence base. In this paper we report the main results of our research so far and also the interesting nature, and power, of the relationships we have identified.

Findings and Discussion

Our starting point was to audit the extent of the current relationship with the hospitality alumni, in particular the part they played in the university community with an emphasis on what they contributed to the education and professionalism of our current education programmes. This was carried out via a programme of interviews with staff members. Concurrently we researched the views of those alumni that we were in touch with via a questionnaire and informal interviews to gauge what they felt they could add to the University community, but also to determine what they felt that an ongoing relationship with the University would give them. The research identified a whole range of areas where the alumni were contributing to the educational experience of the current students, but also a number of areas where this could be enhanced. The audit identified four key themes where the alumni were contributing to the current programmes, these being employment, quality of courses and their development, staff development & student experience. Within these themes a wide range of individual collaborative activities, ranging from mentoring to presenting at

invitation days, course development and so forth, were recognised in the audit - in all 59 specific types of involvement.

From the audit we developed a model to capture these relationships, and also potential relationships, in order to develop both a short-term and a long-term strategy in order to enhance and grow this resource. The four distinct themes underlying the alumni links, which were further developed to reflect current departmental objectives, are employment/employability, enhancement of quality of courses and their development, staff development and maintaining commercial awareness and finally, and most importantly, enhancing the student experience. The four themes are reflected in a range of activities where members of the alumni network are actively involved an annual hospitality conference, course development, students projects and so forth.

There is little explicitly in the literature on how alumni can play a role in the development of employability skills. Interestingly Atkins (1999), in a review of employability projects within Higher Education Institutions, lists alumni projects. However he makes no specific comment on how alumni are part of the employability agenda whereas Lees (2002), in a literature review of graduate employability, makes no mention of the alumni at all. The audit clearly demonstrates that our alumni make a significant contribution to the employability skills of our undergraduates, employability being defined as: 'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2004, 7.)

Employability skills have been an area where we have found the alumni invaluable in improving the student experience. This input has taken a variety of forms, for example student projects where the involvement has ranged from suggesting topics to providing access to data and in some cases advising students on various aspects of the research process. A more innovative initiative has been an approach based on social learning theory, that observational learning may be used to acquire behavioural patterns and influence expectations regarding the ability to perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977). This has been fundamental to the alumni network events where we have hired a room, usually in London, or made use of the University facilities in Sheffield and a keynote speaker has provided the focus for the event; we have then invited both second year and final year students to the event. The event thus becomes an opportunity for alumni and current undergraduates to network with each other.

This we have found particularly useful in raising professional awareness amongst undergraduates, for example what to expect from supervised work experience, what to expect from their first job after graduation and in some cases advice on potential jobs. Our audit identified that in terms of employability skills these events were particularly useful in developing the soft employability skills of professional and commercial awareness, something our research on employers' views of our graduates have identified as an issue (Conneally *et al.*, 2010). One interesting aspect of these events that our evaluation questionnaires identified was the very positive views of the current undergraduates that it

made them feel valued and they began to perceive themselves as future managers and hospitality professionals. Some informal follow-up research found that the venue played a big part, that students found the events away from the University much more positive as they created a bridge between education and industry. Via our contacts with alumni we have been able to get high profile meeting rooms, e.g. the County Hall Hotel overlooking the Thames, at an affordable price; a number of senior Marriott people, including the Cluster Manager for London and the Talent Acquisition Manager, came in and introduced themselves. The quality of the venues and the seniority of Marriott staff apparently gave the undergraduates a real sense of being valued and many of them went on to comment on the feedback forms how this sense of being valued enhanced the value of the day and increased their engagement in the networking event by increasing their self confidence and therefore their preparedness to network.

The other key element of the enhancement of employability has been via mentoring. Mentoring is the process whereby a more experienced person helps a less experienced person develop in some specified capacity (Murray, 1991). Surprisingly there appears to be little in the academic literature about the implementation of mentoring programmes in business and management programmes, specifically in the area of Hospitality Management where there is a long standing recognition of its importance via alumni, but apparently no evaluation of its importance. Several Universities world-wide are beginning to see the potential of the alumni. For example, Flinders University in Australia has funded new positions in the Careers and Industry Liaison Service, including collaborating with the alumni for the provision of mentoring and leadership to current students and graduates (Orrell 2004). "With all this broad attention to the concept of mentoring, little has been written about the implementation of mentoring programs by business schools." (Schlee, 2000, 322)

Schlee's (2000) study of the Mentoring and the Professional Development of Business Students in USA business schools found that alumni were the major source of mentors; moreover Schlee's research evaluated mentoring programmes, concluding that all of the mentor programme administrators interviewed for the second stage of the research felt that most students benefited greatly from participating in mentoring activities. The benefits could be as small as a student getting to meet a person who works in an area he or she is interested in or as large as having a mentor who helps students understand what occupation and what industry would be best for them, at the same time providing them with added motivation to excel. He reports that "some program administrators described dramatic examples of students who became more focused and determined to achieve their maximum potential." (Schlee, 2000, 333).

The benefits of mentoring come under what we would term enhancing soft employability skills, our research with employers has identified the importance of industry awareness as a key skill alongside a range of other intangible skills. In the evaluation of the mentoring programme at SHU a significant benefit of the alumni mentoring network is in instilling in students the requirement of what we term 'professionalism,' that is how they will be expected to behave in a work environment. This reflects the approach to mentoring adopted at SHU where, rather than the classical or primary construct view which sees

mentoring as a relatively long duration, intense developmental relationship, we have adopted the secondary construct approach. This "views mentoring as a short-duration less intense and less inclusive developmental process." (Whitely and Coetsier, 1993, 421). The mentoring approach at SHU tends to focus on employability functions, reflecting what might be expected to normally take place in the workplace, particularly from managers in other units.

This type of mentoring is of particular importance in the hospitality industry where there is high career mobility and independence, which means that a reliance on the classical model of mentoring is inappropriate. Young hospitality professionals are likely to need a number of developmental relationships in the early stages of their careers. Interestingly, the training and experience of mentoring for alumni is found to be beneficial to themselves, particularly as many of our alumni are in the early stages of their careers.

This factor is particularly advantageous to the nature of the mentoring involved as it eases the process of communication, particularly as regards the soft employability skills which we have referred to earlier as 'professionalism', or perhaps better describes a professional behaviour expected by managers within the industry. The evaluation studies show that mentees have found the scheme really useful. Moreover, there is a trend for positive comments as we review and improve our practice year by year; indeed our main source of new mentors is ex-students who were mentees themselves. The graduation ceremony is now becoming our main recruitment point for future mentors as the mentees have come forward to volunteer with a desire to share their own positive experience. Our research again identified that the mentoring scheme was particularly useful in developing commercial and professional awareness amongst the final year, and we now see this as a key part of our strategy of developing employability skills for our undergraduates.

In summary, the following employability skills have been identified as being significantly developed in our undergraduates in collaboration with the alumni network:

- Progressive development of autonomy;
- Skills development;
- Personal development planning;
- Activities reflecting external environments;
- Reflection on the use of knowledge and skills between contexts;
- The development of career management skills;
- Engagement with learning from work;
- Preparation for professional life;
- Engagement with enterprise.

Not surprisingly alumni are, in practice, the first port of call when looking for external advisors for course review and revalidation and a source of potential guest lectures. A more recent and planned innovation, and one in which they are playing an increasing role, are invitation days where prospective students are invited to visit the University and find out about prospective courses. The experience of past students and the fact they are prepared to spend their own time in talking to prospective students is extremely effective in engaging students and there has been a noticeable improvement in the success rate following on from invitation days as the alumni have become more involved. The other area of activity has been the use of the alumni in market research for course development and a similar approach has been adopted in a recent review of skills in Geography at Masters level using a combination of email questionnaires and focus groups of alumni (Mistry *et al.*, 2009). What is particularly interesting about Mistry's approach is that they were using the alumni alongside course leaders and industry representatives to obtain a sector view on skill needs, the alumni providing a view on learning and use of skills. Perhaps this is something the hospitality management sector should consider.

The need for staff development and continual updating is becoming ever more important, the following comment on hospitality surely must apply to hospitality educators:

The truth is that change is occurring all the time and the cycle of change is constant, and hospitality operators who are averse to change will either have to be content themselves with mediocre performance or bleed with thousand cuts since competition will overtake them soon. In today's business environment everything is changing the customers taste & preference, competition, prices, policies, people and employees and products are can literally change overnight. The loyalty of either customers or associates for business in no more a fast and are governed by the new rules of business (Rathore, 2006).

One surprising finding of the audit was how important the alumni were in the staff development process, particularly in ensuring that staff were kept aware of changes in the sector. A key part of our staff development strategy is the use of away days, which include external speakers and tours of facilities but, more importantly, the informal chats associated with such events. When we came to audit these events our alumni had played a key part in the process, ranging from either carrying out the actual talks or tours, to organising them or providing the contacts and, in many cases, negotiating favourable terms on our behalf so that we could run such events on our available budgets.

In addition to the mentor scheme, student projects and network events already discussed, the other big area for alumni involvement was supervised work experience for our undergraduates. Not surprisingly alumni were a significant source of placement opportunities, many of them welcoming the opportunity to return to their old university, the audit also finding that alumni were much more approachable to the undergraduates and that the alumni could talk the same language and understand the concerns of the students. At this point it is perhaps worth noting that the majority of our active alumni members are recent graduates of the last five years. One aspect that the audit uncovered was that those students whose supervisor was a SHU graduate seemed to have a more productive placement experience; this

is something we are investigating further. Our initial findings are that the association with the University created a bond right at the beginning of the relationship and that the alumni supervisor tended to have a strong desire to ensure that the placement student had a successful placement. At the same time it appears that the student found that the shared experience of studying at SHU meant that the alumni supervisor was more approachable and had a better idea of their concerns right from the beginning of the process. It should be emphasised that these are only initial findings and it is our intention to undertake more rigorous research to see whether these observations are real and how we can improve the experience of all the students on placement, not just those lucky enough to have SHU alumni as their supervisor.

Conclusion

When we reviewed the literature at the beginning of this research process we were surprised by the paucity of work on this subject. Interestingly, we could find only one piece of research in the USA specifically trying to identify quality parameters and which concluded that relationships with alumni are a critical quality factor for hospitality management courses 'in hospitality education alumni and industry support are important for mentoring, internships, and permanent placement of graduates' (Assante, 2005). Our own research would endorse Assante's findings and suggest that the potential contribution of hospitality alumni is even greater given the growing importance of employability skills and professionalism needed by new graduates.

The research via the audit revealed the relationship is multi-faceted and we have only just begun to realise the true potential. This realisation reveals that careful consideration when choosing the next area to develop is vital to our continued success. The next area for in depth research is the question of mentoring. A Google search for intragenerational mentoring finds no hits for intragenerational mentoring but 221,000 hits for intergenerational mentoring, reflecting the traditional concept of an older and more experienced person offering guidance to a younger person. The issue of the extent to which age and experiential difference affects the mentoring relationship is something we are currently investigating, initial discussions seem to suggest that this could be an important way of enhancing the student experience in terms of employability skills.

Undertaking this research has led to an ongoing review of our relationship with our alumni and how they contribute to the student experience. This has led to a number of action points to improve the student experience, one particular area which has been fundamental in changing the relationships aspect of our work:

We now find out a huge amount about their roles and their challenges as young graduates when we carry out the mentor training with the alumni and this is then passed onto our undergraduates. An action point from this year's training is that we should carry out a refresher half day with all our mentors, some of whom who have been with us from the beginning. It will be useful to show them the value they bring to our current students and how our thinking has matured. It would also allow them to input back into the process again. It would also give them the opportunity to discuss the odd negative experiences that occur in the mentoring scheme.

To develop a fuller understanding of the evolution of the research, the two authors were inspired by Cohen *et al.* (2009) to adopt an autoethnographic exploration of the alumni and the student experience in the belief that it allows one to weave together story and theory (Spry, 2001) and develop not only a better understanding of our own experiences, but also the experiences of our students and alumni. The discussions were wide ranging, reflecting the complexity of the relationships. Some of the more interesting observations that emerged from our discussions are reported in the appendix. These conversations have been, and continue to be, a key part of the research process as we investigate further and review and enhance the student experience and one we would recommend to other action researchers.

We would suggest that the approach we have adopted is applicable to other action researchers in the field of Higher Education. The power of conversations, structuring these into a framework and then continuing these conversations in a more structured and focused way, is a method we have found to be very successful in unravelling complex relationships and enhancing these relationships via reflection, thus allowing us to adopt a strategic approach to these emerging relationships to maximise the benefits to all.

One final observation is that the reporting of our findings via conferences and presentations, and indeed writing this article, have played an important part in the research process by creating opportunities to think and reflect on what we have learned and what else we need to investigate.

Appendix

"Our Alumni events are also developing in the context of our subject group objective of widening our research community and thus the Alumni Events will also now be the platform for our Visiting Fellows to make a wider contribution through a lecture series, the first one following the theme we have extensively reflected on in this paper, professionalism. We will have speakers from industry as well as our own expert from SHU. This topic is of great interest to industry as the event is being sponsored by the Compass group. "

"Closer working relations with our alumni, particularly our mentors, have allowed us to draw on their expertise in a numbers of ways to enhance the student experience. Some of our most innovative and challenging SWE positions have been provided by this group as, having 'relatively' recently been on placement themselves, they recognise the capabilities of our students at the planning stage. Mentors who have guided particular students through the placement experience often continue in this role for the student's final year and are able to offer employment on graduation."

"This year, due I think to our invitation to students across the year groups to the Alumni Event, there has been a deeper understanding of the mentor scheme and its benefits. Thus this year I have had a student who, whilst being a mentee herself, offered to continue to be a point of contact for the placement student who had followed her on placement. Now this student is a graduate and she has offered to be the mentor for the placement student now in her final year. This is really fantastic as it is organic and I have had no involvement at all. It also shows how having strong relations with placement employers and being able to match their needs in terms of personnel creates a strong team ethic and bond."

"Our annual careers workshop reflects this working partnership with mentors playing a key role by offering one to one advice on CV writing and interview and assessment centre techniques. This event allows students to better understand the expectations of employers in a student friendly way."

"Networking is a key employability skill, but one that some of our students find very daunting. Our annual Alumni Network Event offers our students the opportunity to network in a supportive environment as their first point of contact is their mentor. This 'first' conversation gives them the confidence to approach other alumni and industry partners."

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