Tourism and cooperative education in UK undergraduate courses: are the benefits being realised?

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Abstract

This article presents a critical appraisal of the extent to which students primarily, but also host Departments and employers in the tourism sector, are realising the benefits attributed to cooperative education in course design and delivery in undergraduate tourism management courses. Although the study is based on research in the UK, it is argued that the discussion and findings are of relevance and potentially applicable to similar courses irrespective of where they are delivered. The article draws extensively on the findings of a comprehensive investigation into the planning, practices and outcomes of the most frequently practised form of cooperative education, namely student work experience. Key outcomes of this study are presented and in the process comparisons drawn with the results of earlier studies. In the light of the results and given contemporary developments in higher education and in business practices in the 1990s the authors question whether any real progress has been made in realising the benefits of this substantial element of cooperative education since the late 1980s. Recommendations to address this are presented. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The dynamic growth in the provision of tourism courses since the late 1980s bears witness to the rising profile of tourism, primarily as an economic factor, and the needs of those organisations involved in promoting and responding to the demand for tourism (Parson & Cave, 1991; CNAA, 1993; Middleton & Ladkin, 1996). The fundamental resource of any tourism related organisation is the people who collectively are that organisation thus ipso facto the quality of the staff reflects the quality of the organisation; irrespective of national boundaries. Finding and retaining the right quality of staff undoubtedly presents one of the greatest challenges to organisations. How one assesses the qualities of prospective employees is complex, however one area which stands out is the level of an individual’s personal development, educational background and experience. But it is not axiomatic that because a person has undertaken a programme of studies related to any given sector that s/he has the appropriate expertise and, more importantly, the understanding of an organisation’s operations in that sector which a prospective employer would anticipate. It is partly in recognition of this that cooperative education involving the development of partnerships with external organisations in various ways in course programmes and delivery has developed; a process which is evident in course developments and design in many countries throughout the world. Thus, although the context of this paper is the UK, the subject matter and discussion is of wider relevance and application. The most manifest form of cooperative education are sandwich courses i.e. courses which incorporate periods both of organised full-time work experience and of full-time study, the work experience of placements being linked in some measure to the course content (RISE, 1985).

These courses explicitly recognise the value of work experience as an integral part of the education process; particularly in vocational undergraduate courses involving a period of six to twelve months. The potential
variety in approaches to student work experience [SWE] is substantial. It can range from one day per week during a period of study, 12 weeks during traditional summer vacations to ‘block release’ for a defined period, possibly accounting for one year of a study programme. This variance in approach understandably gave rise to some confusion and lead to the categorisation of sandwich courses. Four categories were determined; Category 1 — the primary focus of this article — is defined as follows:

A course where all students spend at least twenty-six weeks in extra mural work experience which integrates with, and is additional to, their academic studies. The extra mural programme is arranged or approved by the academic staff for assessment of their performance and welfare. The assessment relates to the whole activity and is taken into account either in the final award or a special additional award (McAleenan, 1988).

It is not surprising therefore given the vocational orientation of most undergraduate Tourism courses to find that the majority have adopted this design with the full support of industry (National Liaison Group for Higher Education in Tourism, 1994). The incorporation of SWE in the design stage of the course is thus seen to establish the vocational pedigree of the course and bears witness to the value of work experience as an integral part of the education process (Cassells, 1994). Moreover, it reflects and reinforces the view that to be an effective manager one first and foremost needs practical experience (Leslie & McAleenan, 1990; Leslie, 1994).

The benefits of this system to the three partners — student, employer and educational institute are well documented (Leslie, 1991); a synopsis of which is presented in Table 1. Additionally, SWE can facilitate inputs by representatives from the vocational sector into course development and delivery. Thus, the course programme will be creatively influenced through the improved liaison between programmes and industry. For example, this will help to establish ‘industry advisory panels’, enhance contacts with business community, and visits to students whilst on SWE presents opportunities for the personal development of the staff. Further, the experience and practical knowledge gained by students can be put to good use in tutorial sessions, on the student’s return to college (RISE, 1985). Overall, the liaison between the host department and the tourism sector generally should lead to better course provision, and more informed tutors, as well as more knowledgeable, competent, and ‘industry aware’ students.

Table 1

Indicative advantages of student work experience

The students
- broaden their knowledge of the various sectors.
- encourage a greater awareness of the diversity of the industry.
- valuable opportunity to view the organisation objectively.
- valuable as a reference source.
- the more knowledgeable prospective applicants are about the company the better positioned for appointment.
- influence career choice. potential to reduce period of graduate training programme.

The industry
- availability of high calibre and generally committed staff at an early stage in their development.
- opportunity to bring into the organisation someone who is not steeped in tradition nor one who probably needs re-training.
- basically no ‘turnover’ problems.
- potential contribution of student.
- potential opportunity to undertake research by the student and supported by institution and tutors.
- potentially employing one of to-morrow’s managers at a low cost.
- possibility of the student on graduation applying for a position in a sector of the industry to which they are unsuited is reduced.
- potential employee on graduation more knowledgeable about the company.

The institute
- the contacts developed arising as a result of the placement system could lead to a number of indirect benefits.
- facilitate inputs by the industry into course development.
- increased liaison between the college and industry should lead to better course provision, and more informed tutors, as well as more knowledgeable, competent, and ‘industry aware’ students.

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2 Category 2 is similar to Category 1 but involves no formal assessment; Category 3 is a course wherein the SWE is an intercalated year; Category 4 involves a pre-university placement year [A.S.E.T., 1987].
might be seen as idealistic, however, witness the record of the University of Surrey. This University has been ranked for the third year in succession the number one University in the UK league table based on the numbers of graduates gaining employment. The University places substantial emphasis on SWE (Izbicki, 1998).

The significance of the value of cooperative education, particularly SWE, has continued to be reaffirmed by government and employers in many reports (Trippier, 1987; Lavery, 1992; EISOP, 1991; Botterill, 1996) and emphasised in the findings of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in the UK — the Dearing Report (Dearing, Sir Ron, 1997). Overall, this reaffirms the commonly held notion that practical experience is essential, providing good experience and increases confidence. A point well made by the Committee of Research into Sandwich Education [RISE] states:

There is a need for concerted effort by educational institutions and employers to secure the closest practicable relationships between the academic course content and the supervised work experience (RISE, 1985).

SWE is an area that has gained little empirical study generally (Day, Kelly, Parket & Parr, 1982; RISE, 1985; Leslie & McAleenan, 1990; and notably recently Bushky, Brunt & Baber, 1997). However, and more pertinent to this context, is the debate on the planning and management of SWE in hospitality courses initiated by the Industrial Tutors Group [ITG].

A debate which has been informed by a few research studies, predominantly undertaken in the early nineties, into Category 1 sandwich courses in hospitality management. (Leslie & McAleenan, 1990; West & Jamieson, 1990; Leslie, 1994; Busby et al. 1997). Given the recognised value of SWE and the paucity of research in the wider context of tourism, the study of Busby et al. (1997) is to be welcomed. However, it would be unwise to generalise on their findings. The primary reason for this is that the study though it involved an undergraduate sandwich course [Category 1] also included a Higher National Diploma course, the SWE element of which was a combination of three weeks in the first year and a further minimum of nine weeks in the second year. The study does present valuable insights into the placement process, in particular the views of employers, but it also raises questions about such aspects as:

- the substantial support for sandwich courses;
- the studies and reports of the ITG and the launch of the ‘Hospitality Partnership’ in 1994 (H.C.I.M.A., 1994);
- contemporary developments in higher education in the UK in the 1990s, e.g. the increased emphasis on quality as witnessed, for example, by the introduction of the Quality Assessment and Research Assessment Exercises;
- education and training opportunities designed to promote and develop enhanced skills amongst the workforce;
- initiatives designed to improve management practices in the workplace; for example, Total Quality Management (Witt & Muhleman, 1994).

Further, the dynamic growth in the provision of such courses will have generated substantially increased demand for SWE. Therefore, there is a greater need to ensure ‘best practice’ is adopted in the management of the processes involved to ensure such opportunities and

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1 A formal group comprising the industrial tutors of hospitality management education courses established by the Standing Conference on Hospitality Management Education in the UK.

2 A two year course [or three years if it includes a 48 week placement] which is generally accepted to be equivalent in terms of educational level attained to the first two years of a degree programme.

3 The Quality Assessment Exercise involved a thorough, highly detailed inspection and examination of a Department’s planning, organisation and delivery of the courses provided and the related procedures. Departments were graded on the basis of ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’ and results published leading to ‘league tables’. The Research Assessment Exercise involved reviewing the research outputs of a Department — basically publications in learned Journals — and subsequently grading Departments using a slightly complex system; the top grade being 5*. 

4 ...the interaction which naturally occurs with the organisation and management of placements (Busby et al., 1997, p. 9).

5 The extent to which placements actually do provide additional skills and understanding,

6 The quintessential role of the tutor responsible for the placement process,

7 And, most importantly,

8 The need for placements which realise the potential benefits of the system for all three partners.
the support of employers are not lost. Concerns arise here not only about the ability of the sector to supply the necessary number of opportunities but also the quality of the opportunities. Additionally, the potential of the sector to provide appropriate opportunities for those aspiring to management careers is open to question. Recognising these aspects and the above factors brings into focus the planning, organisation and practices of SWE. Has ‘best practice’, as informed by the earlier experiences of those involved in SWE, the findings of research and initiatives designed to increase the potential realisation of the benefits, been adopted? If this is not the case then benefits will be lost. Also, resource costs will increase — for example, through low placement retention rates, related opportunities missed and the cooperation of some employers lost.

The key question to address is how successful are the host Departments in managing SWE. Success may be gauged in two ways — obtaining a varied range of placements to meet the total required or, and the more important, the level of achievement of the associated benefits. The former is but a list, indicating nothing as regards the suitability, quality and indeed appropriateness of the experience involved. Rather it is the realisation of the benefits — the key indicators of quality and value — which should serve to gauge the success, or otherwise, of SWE. Busby et al. provide some indications as to the success of the process in the context of the views and attitudes of those employers who place students. However, it is necessary to take a more comprehensive review of the process across a number of courses if we are to establish with any degree of confidence the extent to which the attributed benefits are being realised. Through this approach we will be able to establish whether the processes and practices involved have improved in comparison with the findings of the studies identified earlier. This is our primary objective and thus it is to the findings of just such a study to which we now turn our attention (Leslie & Richardson, 1997).

2. The study

The study sought to undertake a comprehensive examination and evaluation of the approach to the management, related practices and student experiences involved in SWE. The primary aims were:

- to investigate the approach by those responsible, i.e. industrial tutors [IT] to the planning, organisation and administration of SWE;
- to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of students prior to and post the experience;
- to investigate the involvement and attitudes of employers.

The methodology developed was informed by earlier research into the areas identified above in order for direct comparisons to be drawn with the findings of that research. Also, and with attention to other studies, to establish whether progress had been made in realising the benefits of SWE. The first step was to identify the undergraduate Tourism courses. Nine courses were selected to achieve a wide geographical distribution and cross section of courses in terms of when the course originally started, i.e. each course had to have at least the first cohort of post-SWE students. The Departments/IT were then invited to participate in the project and only one refused. Each IT was invited to complete a questionnaire designed primarily to elicit course details and further information on the approach to the planning and organisation of SWE. Predominantly, the SWE periods involved were of 48 weeks and commenced at the end of the second year of study. The average number of places required per course was 71 and the process often only managed by one IT. The following factors were also established and it is particularly striking that they differ very little from previous research (Leslie, 1990a).

- The approach to the management of the placement system is generally similar; tutors appear to be basically satisfied with the approach adopted.
- Tutors appear to be generally satisfied with, or perhaps more accurately accept, the resources available. However, one aspect about which they all had concerns was the shortage of resources, e.g. time, administration support and a defined budget; some tutors noted the need for supporting materials, for example to help develop interview techniques.
- Students, with very few exceptions, all satisfactorily progress to the next stage of the course.

Two surveys were designed to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of students pre-SWE and post-SWE with particular attention to how SWE was organised and managed, and experiential learning. The design of the questionnaires was informed by the survey vehicles used in earlier studies in order to enable direct comparisons to be drawn with those studies, to which we added attention to the quality of training and the development of personal transferable skills. The tutors involved undertook to distribute, collate and return the questionnaires.

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6 That is, the number of SWE opportunities that once established are used the following year [and so on] thus leading to continuity and potentially to enhancement of the experience and thus attributed benefits.

7 This was established by reference to the UCAS Handbook.
The completion of the questionnaires was undertaken in the presence of the tutor. A sample of 189 and 106 ‘pre’- and ‘post’-placement students was obtained [representative of approximately 33 and 19 per cent of the potential total of ‘pre’- and ‘post’-students, respectively]. The surveys were then processed and analysed using SPSSx. A survey of employers was also undertaken. After discussion with the tutors it was decided that a batch of questionnaires would be sent to each one for distribution by them to employers and returned to the tutor for onward posting. Clearly, this was not the ideal approach; we would have preferred to approach the employers directly. However, tutors are generally wary of passing on their ‘contacts’. The resultant sample, not surprisingly perhaps, was low though evidenced a comprehensive cross section of employers. Interestingly over a quarter of the employers in the survey sample did not liaise directly with the IT. Though speculative, it may be surmised that those employers who did return questionnaires are particularly supportive of the practice. Secondly, that non-participation reflects the attitudes of some employers and/or the quality of their relationship with the IT. However, albeit the sample involved was limited and thus the findings need to be treated with care in their interpretation and wider applicability, they do compare favourably with other studies (Jones, Carrol & Hunter-Jones, 1995).

3. The findings

It is not the intention here to present all the findings of the study rather to concentrate on those results which are directly comparable with earlier, similar research, in addition to which are those findings which contribute to a more comprehensive discussion.

3.1. SWE positions

The SWE opportunities are generally established through the initiative of the IT [49 per cent], through students [40 per cent], or a combination of both [10 per cent], leading to an extensive choice and geographical range of opportunities (Exemplified by Busby et al., 1997, and see Table 1); as is expected by most students. The involvement of employers is invariably catalysed by the IT or a student; a finding reaffirmed by the employers’ survey. In other words, whilst industry supports the practice employers actively promoting SWE opportunities are rare.

The ‘allocation’ of positions is very much a function of student choice and the pragmatism and experience of the IT. This process may be further refined: one IT requires each student to prepare a skills audit — gaps are then identified and subsequently matched to potential position and then discussed with the IT. In preparation for employers, the students prepare curriculum vitae [CV] usually with some, though perhaps limited, guidance; applications to the prospective employers are then processed. The students expect to be interviewed; approximately 9 out of every 10 did attend an interview. That all students were not interviewed is partly explained by the availability of overseas opportunities. Significantly, research in 1988 found that less than half of students [44 per cent] were interviewed (McAleenan, 1988). It emerged from the employer’s survey that a student’s presentation, attitudes and general ‘life experience’ are the substantive factors in selection by employers rather than previous experience of the organisations’s operations [those employers who did consider it important were all in the travel sector]. Essentially, they are looking for commitment, intelligence, ability and adaptability. As one employer expressed it — “We will provide the experience”. Rarely was reference made to the course itself though two respondents did note that the course demonstrates interest in field. Notably, some employers said that students should be encouraged to select opportunities with UK based companies directly relevant to their field of study rather than overseas positions as waiters/waitresses. Whilst the latter might be attractive it was the employers’ view that they offer little in terms of the student’s course of study.

3.2. The experience

In order to enhance the realisation of the learning opportunities and thus the benefits to student and employer alike, due consideration should be given to what the student will be doing during his/her period with the company, and why it will be valuable. In other words, detailed attention should be given to the objectives of the SWE and how these will be achieved. This should be presented in a formalised work programme which, undoubtedly, will enhance the experience and realisation of the benefits. Significantly, 72 per cent of post-placement students indicated that they felt a defined set of objectives should be established for their SWE. Surprisingly perhaps, of those students who did have such programmes they were rarely discussed with the IT. Although the majority of students expect such programmes to be developed less than 50 per cent actually had such a programme (see Table 2). Of greater concern is the fact that little more than half the students received a period of induction and a third no form of formal training (see Table 2). These findings were affirmed by the tutors’ survey, only one of whom indicated that the majority [approximately 75 per cent] of their placements provided an induction period of at least two days.

8 For a comprehensive discussion on such an approach see Watson (1990).
An indication of the general areas in which students did gain some training is presented in Table 3. In addition to those categories noted some students undertook courses in customer care and/or ‘Welcome Host’ — a programme aimed at promoting the local knowledge and awareness of the needs of others of those persons most likely to have direct contact with visitors, e.g. receptionists, taxi drivers. The views of the post SWE students on the quality of the training they received was rather ambivalent as the results presented in Fig. 1 suggest. The fact that nearly half of them considered the quality to be ‘adequate’ or less is a matter of concern. Attention to National Vocational Qualifications [NVQ], i.e. accreditation of work-based skills, was also included in the surveys as the promotion of training, and the formal accreditation of the skills developed, has been a major initiative of the UK Government. The results indicated that few of the participants gave these any attention. Two IT enquired about the possibility of NVQ when establishing SWE positions and the overall bias amongst employers was towards ‘not important at all’.

However, of wider value is the development of a student’s personal skills. The extent to which students felt that a range of personal transferable skills had been developed as a result of their experience is presented in Table 4 and to facilitate clarity in Fig. 2. The limited development of skills in information technology, presentation and writing — key managerial competencies is striking. The four areas rated most ‘poorly developed’ are areas which industry increasingly cite as influential factors in selection of potential staff (Busby et al., 1997). The strength of the development of skills in customer relations and oral communication arguably reinforces perceptions that the positions involved are very operations orientated. Not surprisingly, therefore, opportunities for supervisory/managerial experience was also found to be limited. Only 30 per cent of the students indicated that they had an opportunity to gain such experience. Of further concern is that 40 per cent of the students, both ‘pre’- and ‘post’-placement, did not think they should gain such experience yet they were all on management orientated courses. Explanations from employers as to why a student might not gain this experience were cited as: unacceptable to existing staff [small operations]; possible lack of ability; students do not have sufficient knowledge.

### 3.3. Other factors

- **Duration of placement:** The widely held view on the duration of SWE is that it should be for 48 weeks or at the least 26 weeks (Leslie, 1990b). Also, that it should be positioned in the course when students are most able to contribute to the organisation, i.e. after two years of study; a stage at which students are more developed. Shorter periods, even if on more than one occasion within the programme of studies, are of little value (Leslie & McAleenan, 1990). The SWE for these courses was predominantly for 48 weeks, and to a lesser extent, approximately 24 weeks. This is the period of time widely favoured by employers and does facilitate continuity.

- **Remuneration:** approximately half of the students were paid £125 or less per week although some also received additional benefits such as accommodation, meals on duty and staff discounts. This level of pay is less than the equivalent for a part/time shelf stacker in a supermarket.

- **Visits:** less than 50 per cent of the students received two visits. In the case of the 48 week period of SWE [most of the courses in this study] this is contrary to the details in course documents, and most notably a recent report on Hospitality Management (H.E.F.C.E., 1998), which state that students will receive at least two visits.
Table 4
Post-SWE students’ perceptions of the development of personal skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Responses (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer relations</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation skills</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report writing</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Assessment**: the assessment of SWE is still a contentious matter. The students’ comments included such points as ‘logbooks are a hassle’ and that assessment should be based on performance and not ‘academic’ assignments. These comments serve to reinforce the view that: There is a danger that projects and reports are set so that there is something to assess in a conventional way (ITG, 1987).

The benefits to the student are difficult to ascertain and the contribution it may make to reflective assessment of a student’s learning and personal development achievements is limited (ITG, 1987; Beavis, 1987). In recognising such problems one Department has introduced for a trial period three monthly reports. The student defines his/her objectives for the first three months of the work experience. Towards the end of the first period the students are required to review their achievements, define objectives for the next three months and forward a report each time to the IT.

- **Debriefing**: the tutors, with one exception, indicated that the amount of time given to debriefing students on their return from SWE was unsatisfactory. The general consensus was that each student should have a minimum of 1 h.

- **Integration**: little evidence of integration between SWE and students’ academic course was found; SWE continues to be ‘boxed off’ in course programmes, a factor which is exacerbated by modularisation of courses.

3.4. **Management and related processes**

The study also sought to elicit the views of the tutors and employers involved in a number of aspects relating to the planning, organisation and management of SWE. The tutors were invited to comment on whether they felt there could be better liaison between Departments and employers prior to the placements commencing. The
4. Issues emerging

The following key issues emerge from the foregoing findings and discussion. What is significant about these concerns is that they are all predominantly the result of poor management.

- The approach to the planning and organisation of SWE in most cases is generally limited raising concerns about the commitment of host Departments to this significant aspect of the course. Full advantage is not made of the opportunities arising from the system in terms of career choice and preparation. For example, few employers may attend the Department and though the primary purpose may be for SWE this is an opportunity for a presentation on the company, organisation and/or sector involved. Thus, a student’s awareness and knowledge of the sector and the agencies involved is increased. Further, informal group meetings between the students and employers would also be beneficial.


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Greater guidance could be given to students on the preparation and presentation of curriculum vitae and interview experience. Secondly, more attention should be given to the development of negotiation skills and management competencies.

- Liaison with employers is often limited with some employers noting that some Departments have a very poor approach to liaison, indeed to the whole process, which will have a negative effect. Basically, it is understandable if employers are reluctant in some cases to support or commit themselves further to the process if they have been treated in a rather cavalier manner.

- The students need a better understanding of the workplace, the real value of SWE and awareness of the potential to learn from the situation. They should be more clearly focused as to what they are seeking and research the prospective employer. Furthermore, they should take more responsibility to negotiate training with their prospective employers.

- Employers generally need to be more committed to the process and not just limited to perhaps nothing more than offering the student ‘a job’. A further point is the need to ensure continuity with IT as regards the contact person.

- The lack of commitment to the definition of objectives for the placement period [a point confirmed by 72 per cent of post-SWE students] and formalisation of the placement is notable, in particular the following areas: work-experience programmes; induction; training; all areas which demand the commitment of employers and over which IT at best have limited influence. The limited opportunities of gaining supervisory/managerial experience serve to reinforce the view that employers may be more interested in what the student can do on arrival rather than what he/she may be able to offer in terms of knowledge (Roy, 1988; Orr et al., 1992), or be able to do in the future.

- SWE programmes and detailed induction periods are often not prepared yet these would be very helpful to the students, potentially avoid problems and be beneficial to all partners.

- The majority of employers are not obtaining the wider benefits that are potentially available through the SWE system thus more effort needs to be given to increasing their awareness of the need for, and value of placements; However, some employers are evidently only interested in what might be termed the primary benefits i.e. the availability of a capable, able-bodied person [in some cases at less than the general rate of pay].

The foregoing issues arise predominantly due to weaknesses in the management and planning of SWE. Thus, though they have been identified through research in the UK they are equally likely to arise in sandwich courses

9 For a discussion of the development of work experience programmes see Watson (1990) and Jowett and Jackson (1993).
offered by other educational institutes irrespective of geographical location. Undoubtedly, they can be addressed and resolved through better practice. If such practice is not adopted whenever and wherever sandwich courses are offered then valuable opportunities for development and industry-education partnerships will be lost, to the detriment of all involved and significantly, in the longer term, to the tourism per se. Further, if the value of SWE is not substantially realised then the continuance of this practice is open to question.

5. Conclusion

The preliminary discussion recognised that SWE is the key factor evidencing the vocational nature of these courses in their design and offers a substantial range of potential benefits for the three partners involved, i.e. students, employers and the Department hosting the course. However, as studies of SWE, most notably in the hotel and catering sector, have found the attributed benefits were rarely maximised. With cognisance of this, and developments in education and training — both in higher education and industry — we undertook to investigate the degree to which current approaches as practised in undergraduate tourism management courses evidenced better attainment of the attributed benefits. As the findings presented reveal, in most areas of the processes involved little progress has been achieved in comparison with the findings of earlier research. Substantial discrepancies between the perceptions of pre-SWE and the actual experience of post-SWE students were again evident and demonstrates that the benefits to the students et al. are not being fully realised. For many students it failed to provide the range of experience they were hoping for, or at least, anticipated, gaining.10 It is quite possible that this will influence their career choice [away from tourism] and, through debriefing sessions and informal discussion with others, potentially influence other students. The broader results indicate that in most cases employers and host Departments are also failing to maximise the associated opportunities. Certainly basic benefits will be achieved, e.g. students at the least will gain some knowledge of the organisation and the workplace though this might be counterproductive, i.e. a negative experience; employers will gain a low-cost employee; host Departments will meet the minimum aim of placing all students. However, the more substantial direct, and potential indirect benefits — or ‘domino effects’ — arising from positive liaison between Departments and employers, are often missed. In some instances the process may be counterproductive due to some employers developing poor perceptions of a Department due to poor practice in the latter’s management of SWE.

Explanations for this situation abound but quintessentially it comes down to the commitment of each of the partners involved; a factor common to all sandwich courses irrespective of the country or institute. Although the host Departments are only one part of the triangle they are potentially the most influential partner and thus our attention here initially focuses on the planning and management of SWE by the IT. The key to success undoubtedly lies in the commitment of the person(s) responsible for SWE, i.e. the IT and their experience and understanding of the workplace. The effectiveness of IT is substantially influenced by the recognition given to the role of SWE within the Department and by the resources, invariably very limited, placed at their disposal, e.g. time, administrative support. Tutors are invariably under pressure to place all the students thus they have to be pragmatic; therefore they understandably focus primarily on obtaining the necessary number of positions secondary to which are factors such as range of opportunities, visits, and quality. However, those tutors who are most professional in their approach and in the provision of supporting materials will be more successful in gaining opportunities and, more importantly, retaining them for future students.

To enhance the realisation of the benefits and support for the IT there is a pressing need to establish an approach based on ‘best practice’ which necessarily demands a greater commitment by the Department. Such a commitment is all too easily avoided and may lead to practices which reflect poorly on the Department/Institute, thereby reinforcing potentially negative attitudes of employers. Further, if students feel that the management of SWE is poor, that there is a lack of suitable opportunities and the SWE itself was limited then this will further serve to influence them away from this sector as a career choice. This is potentially compounded by the situation in many courses wherein SWE operates in isolation, despite the platitudes of those who suggest otherwise.

Recognising the foregoing factors, and taking into account other aspects such as the drive for quality, we recommend that in the longer term the way forward is the adoption of a total quality approach to the management of SWE.11 Arguably, this approach will lead to the realisation of the full benefits of placements and have potentially substantial and highly positive domino effects on the rest of the course. It should also lead to a more

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10 This outcome is comparable with the other studies, for example: see Little and Poole (1989), Orr, Murray and McKenna (1992) and Purcell (1993).

11 For a discussion on such an approach see Witt and Muhlemann (1994) and Leslie (1994).
enterprising education system at least with tourism degrees thereby encouraging a more positive attitude, and a better understanding of the agencies and organisations involved. Further, it would certainly go a long way towards addressing a number of criticisms of tourism courses, e.g. suitability of course, involvement of industry, employment opportunities. Importantly, such an approach should lead to changing attitudes on the part of employers towards employing graduates thereby increasing the available opportunities. Ultimately, this will lead to many more professional, more capable practitioners involved in the sector to the overall benefit of tourism and tourists across the globe.

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References


