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‘Short of a Picnic?’: Reconsidering sandwich-programmes in cruise education

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ABSTRACT

Internships are regarded to be essential and complementary to cruise (and tourism) curricula. Yet, their relevance remains largely unquestioned. This paper aims at exploring the internship-related perceptions of: cruise-employers, students and educators, whilst highlighting and interpreting potential misalignments. Our methodological paradigm is explorative-qualitative, utilising primarily content analysis complemented by semi-structured interviews. Students' perceptions are derived through a systematic coding of 34 internship reports, whilst those of educators and employers extracted by 15 semi-structured interviews. General morphological analysis and cross-consistency assessment were applied to compare the different worldviews, followed by a discussion of implications and recommendations for tourism/cruise curricula.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, integrating work placements in study programmes is fairly wide-spread and commonly-accepted as an essential component for business-focused university-level education (Busby & Fiedel, 2001; Kiely & Ruhnke, 1998). Collins (2002: 95) states that: “(Tourism) education should be business oriented, relevant to the industry and should be supported by incentive industrial training programs”. Such degrees are often referred to as: ‘sandwich programmes’, due to the analogy of inserting (or integrating) a work placement period between traditional study semesters. The rationale is to facilitate reflective learning. According to Fidgeon (2010) such placements are usually inserted mid-way through the study programme. This is justified on the premise that, in order to be able to perform their placement tasks¹, students require a certain degree of theoretical foundation and knowledge, whilst the experience they gain constitutes a valuable input for the remaining of their studies (ibid).

Ironically, the term ‘sandwich’ also serves as a metaphor for questioning effectiveness and validity of such a practice. ‘A sandwich short of a picnic’ is a modern English language idiom used to indicate that someone is lacking intelligence².

2. The ‘empty sandwich’: Existing research on cruise internships

Including work placements in University curricula has generally been viewed as a ‘win-win’ situation; whilst advantages for students include competence-building, understanding real-world challenges (van 't Klooster, van Wijk, Go, & van Rekom,

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¹ Over the next pages, the terms ‘placement’ and ‘internship’ are used interchangeably and are regarded as synonymous.

² <http://www.omniglot.com/language/idioms/crazy.php>. Accessed: 09/03/2012.

2008), knowledge transferability for the continuous study as well as improved employability, employers face the advantage of employing a flexible work force at moderate costs (Busby, Brunt, & Baber 1997). Consequently, the success of student placements depends on harmonising student and University requirements, and employer benefits (Busby et al., 1997). Although multiple advantages of student placements seem to follow this basic logic, Aggett and Busby (2011) point out that the number of students in UK higher education institutions opting for a work placement is declining. Reasons for the decline are “a lack of understanding of the value of work experience, and a lack of drive and determination” (Aggett & Busby, 2011: 112). However, it has to be considered that their data focus on students undertaking a voluntary placement year while most research focuses on obligatory placements included in University curricula for shorter periods of time and that generally, the number of international placements is generally increasing (Gibson & Busby, 2009).

A critical perspective on whether the subject tourism should be studied in a University context in the first place has been developed by Zagonari (2009: 5). He states that: “There is a single labour market where high and low tourism-service quality firms can choose to employ tourism graduated students vs. tourism non-graduated or differently-from-tourism graduated students”, indicating competing workforce between tourism and non-tourism employees. More specifically, the aforementioned author argues that there is limited recognition of formal tourism education by tourism employers, leading them to value work experience more than a formal degree. The employer's preference of concrete over abstract experiences would support an inclusion of work placements into existing University degrees, in order to provide their students with the required practical component. This contention is also supported by Richardson (2010) who found that newcomers to University tourism education did not have a real life understanding of any types of available work and employment conditions of the industry; thus work placements would provide students with industry related knowledge.

Although a number of studies focusing on tourism placements consider the wider tourism industry, research on student placements in the cruise industry is virtually non-existent. An exception is Gibson and Busby's (2009) study that identifies challenges of international student placements. Although focusing on tourism students, the majority of participants undertook their placements onboard cruise ships. Focus groups consisting of placement administration managers and university's work placement groups, as well as intern interviews revealed obstacles in regard to practice, policy and management from the institutional perspective and to communication, culture and self and context in relation to intern support. In line with various studies, Gibson & Busby (2009) share the common assumption that integrating work placements in study programmes is beneficial to its stakeholders: “International internships add value to students' learning careers” (Gibson & Busby, 2009: 478); “sandwich placements play a key role for future employment” (Busby et al. 1997: 107). By applying general morphological and cross consistency analysis, this article questions the very underlying sense of including internships in undergraduate cruise tourism programmes; this study discusses the question: *Does it make sense to include a compulsory internship in a tourism and cruise programme's curriculum?* thereby emphasising the key issues for work placements from various stakeholders' perspectives and discussing its align- and misalignments.

3. The ‘club sandwich’: Research methodology

3.1. Descriptive exploration of internship report contents

Worldwide there are only a handful of cruise management full-time study programmes (university-level). Amongst them the ‘B.A. in Cruise Tourism Management’ offered at the Bremerhaven University of Applied Sciences has been operational since 2003 which requires an internship (3- or 6-month) in a cruise-operator or related company³. Following the completion of their internships, students are expected to write a reflection report outlining their experiences and advise future students considering doing their internship in the same company. Internship reports include general information about the internship (employer profile, duration of the internship, application procedure, etc.), key duties, supervision by the employer, (un)expected knowledge gained and an overall reflective summary of their experiences. As such they serve as a comprehensive record of students' perceptions related to cruise-related internships, indirectly revealing their expectations and wishes in this domain.

In order to identify key issues of work placements from the students' perspective, a total of 177 internship reports originating from the years 2006–2011 were searched for comments related to the students':

- Overall evaluation of the internship.
- Evaluation of ‘fit’ with the study programme.
- Evaluation of ‘fit’ with future career plans.
- Evaluation of supervision quality.

The corresponding comments were collected and assigned a score (1—Good/Satisfied, 2—OK/Neutral, 3—Not Good/Not Satisfied, 0—Not mentioned) by researchers based on the use and count of adjectives attributed to those areas. From the total of 177 internships:

³ http://www.hs-bremerhaven.de/Binaries/Binary15309/ABI_2011_12_07_Nr_143_HS_Brhv.pdf (p.1523).

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