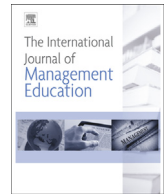


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Research notes

Learning to work interculturally and virtually: Developing postgraduate hospitality management students across international HE institutions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Given the challenges of developing inter-culturally competent, digitally literate, team players amidst a realm of other postgraduate competencies this paper outlines the initiative developed by academic teams from three European institutions. The paper outlines the virtual intercultural collaboration and its development and then reports on the results of a survey conducted with participating students from two years of the initiative. Students' perceptions of the generic value of specific skills sets in virtual team working and intercultural competence are identified as well as their views of the specific project's capacity to develop their own skills in the relevant areas, are explored. The results suggest that since social media, team work and intercultural interactions seem to be ever present dimensions of the contemporary world of work it appears to be important that students encounter meaningful virtual and intercultural learning opportunities during their postgraduate management studies. Finally this paper highlights the value of inter-programme teaching and learning collaborative activities between European higher education institutions.

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1. Introduction

Since the Bologna Declaration of June 1999 European higher education institutions have attempted to move forward with the synchronisation of HE qualification systems in Europe. The joint recognition of degree qualifications, credit accumulation and transfer and the facilitation of European mobility for staff and students have been part of these developments. Further declarations of intent for convergence at this level of education have maintained the change momentum for Universities and faculty while they also vie for student numbers and research money (Keeling, 2006; Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2010). Alongside these events there has been a growing requirement to provide students with the skills and knowledge that leads to competent professionals for the international hospitality and tourism sectors (Gannon, 2008; Tavitiyaman, Weerakit, & Ryan, 2014). These sectors have been marked by a vocational legacy and their own nature has always been characterised by a diverse, mobile workforce (Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2013). This increasing diversity poses new challenges in the hospitality management education, in particular at postgraduate level as these students are the new professionals shaping the future of

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the industry and, hence, require interpersonal competences to lead such workforces and manage complex international organisations effectively. Among the different pedagogical approaches, experiential learning proves to be an effective route in this area of education where theory and practice can be linked implicitly and explicitly.

At the same time, there is growing interest in virtual team working for professionals as technology facilitates synchronous and asynchronous communication and companies expand across national borders through networks, mergers and acquisitions, and organic growth mechanisms (Hertel, Geister, & Kontradt, 2005; Matveev & Milter, 2004). This phenomenon of growth has been particularly apparent in the international hospitality and tourism industry where networks and complex distribution channels and supply chains are particularly evident (Xiao, O'Neill, & Mattila, 2012). The management education literature has also highlighted the value of developing prospective managers' and leaders' digital, virtual working and intercultural skills but bemoaned the difficulties of providing suitable meaningful experiences in academic settings to advance these skills (Erez et al., 2013; Richards & Bilgin, 2012).

Whereas student diversity in the classroom has the potential to enrich education, this diversity also has the potential to create conflict as people come together with different values and ways of understanding (Blasco, 2009; De Vita, 2001, 2002; Patterson, Carrillo & Salinas, 2011). There is an increasing need to be aware of cultural differences, as assimilating these is paramount in determining the effective management of businesses reinforcing the need to develop cross-culturally aware managers (Taras et al., 2013). To achieve this aim of culturally competent managers universities, in particular, are challenged to bring students closer to industry by linking theory and practice in the curricula through simulation activities and virtual interactions. This article outlines a virtual intercultural team working initiative across three European higher education institutions and its development and evaluation of the results of a survey conducted with participating students. Students' perceptions of the generic value of specific skills sets in virtual team working and intercultural competence are reported as well as their views of the specific initiative's capacity to develop knowledge and skills in the relevant areas. The results suggest that since social media, team work and intercultural interactions seem to be ever present dimensions of the contemporary world of work it appears to be important that students encounter meaningful simulated virtual and intercultural learning opportunities during their studies. This highlights the value of inter-programme teaching and learning collaboration activities. Furthermore while students tend to be familiar with social media they do not use it as an effective working medium and the ability to communicate purposively across cultures to achieve an assignment brief enhances their digital and information literacy skills further. As such this paper explores a unique teaching and learning initiative, which connects postgraduate students in different countries and simulates a virtual intercultural team working environment and task.

2. Literature review

2.1. Experiential learning

A variety of pressures have reinforced the role of student employability on the agendas of business schools (Avramenko, 2011) as long term career prospects and graduate competencies are directly linked with the students' reasons to study. Experiential learning is of growing interest in higher education as it carries the student closer to an area of knowledge as well as facilitating deep knowledge (Ruhanen, 2005). Bringing students closer to the world of work through the linking theory and practice in the curricula is gaining greater importance with simulation activities and virtual interactions proving to be useful tools in higher education settings (Ruhanen, 2005; Tiwari, Nafees, & Krishnan, 2014). "Learning in such a way is more effective even than learning within the real work environment or "on the job", as the latter, while providing direct experience, is limited by the routine nature of tasks and the complexity of the work environment" (Avramenko, 2011, p. 356). This type of experiential learning promotes new competencies related to industry knowledge and understanding (Lee, 2008) and proves effective as students have higher levels of enthusiasm towards the learning approach, leading to increased knowledge retention and skill acquisition (Ruhanen, 2005).

Experiential learning explores learning by doing and reflecting. This type of learning is beneficial for deep learning and allows students to better assimilate knowledge and its future application as future managers (Edelheim & Ueda, 2007; Tiwari et al., 2014). Experiential learning is based on the perspective that learning is a holistic process that incorporates all our life experiences and, indeed, to learn, people should engage in higher order thinking to personalise information (Edelheim & Ueda, 2007; Finch, Peacock, Lazdowski, & Hwang, 2015). Communication of the experiences associated with experiential learning form a crucial part of this approach (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002) which means that learning in preparation for diverse and dispersed environments should form a core part of experiential learning. Experiential learning is also seen to be at the root of lifelong learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) as it is often conceived as a process of learning from direct life experiences controlled by the individual. Following from this relationship between learning and life experiences, experiential learning as Kolb's research (2005) indicates should balance the academic input and life experience.

Huddleston and Unwin (2007) believed that a great deal of higher education teaching fails to recognise the importance of these experiences. Consistent with constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) involving students in a number of processes that actively encourage them to move through the experiential learning cycle and value previous experiences and knowledge is crucial. In an attempt to emphasise the value of experiential learning, students in this study participated in practical workshops in addition to classroom-based sessions linked to the same theoretical areas as the workshop sessions. As part of these learning aspects, Maier and Thomas (2013) affirm that students in vocational/professional areas, such as

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