

How Effective is Hospitality Work Placement ? A Case Study Approach

Sharleen Howison
School of Applied Management, Otago Polytechnic Dunedin

Abstract

This research paper addresses the effectiveness of work placement as a learning strategy. The case study approach is adopted for this research in which a hospitality second year undergraduate student is interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of the learning within the workplace and how effective this has been. Student A, who is a second year hotel stream student enrolled on the Bachelor of Hospitality and Tourism Management comments on her knowledge and skills when entering the work place and the transference of knowledge gained previously in the institution. Sharleen, a convener for the work placement program interviews Student A as part of the gathering of evidence alongside referring to workplace self evaluations provided by the student, employer evaluations and student course handbooks. Student A also discusses the benefits and advantages of enrolling into an undergraduate program, which includes a workplace component as opposed to a traditional academic undergraduate degree. The paper concludes with some suggestions about future research and innovations that the author believes should be introduced into the work placement area within the degree, which would help enhance student learning in the future.

Introduction

The research question: 'How Effective is Work placement? – A Case Study Approach', is the topic of this research paper. To explore this question, the case study methodology was adopted and focused on a second year hospitality and tourism management degree student referred to in this paper as Student A. Through questionnaire, interview and a student report and employer evaluation of work placement, evidence was collected to establish whether or not transference of knowledge actually took place, along with any other learning benefits in relation to the cooperative education placement. This paper will focus on the key theories of learning which relate directly to cooperative education, by referring to the work of Kolb and Dewey. The history of cooperative education will be traced back to Antioch University in the United States of America, which integrated cooperative education placement into their academic programs as early as the 1920s. This will also form part of the discussion, along with reference to a paper by Professor Patricia Linn, an academic from this institution (Linn & Howard, 2004). The main purpose of this case study is to ascertain the student perceptions of the work placement in reference to the transference of knowledge and learning benefits for this student. The research findings based around this issue will be discussed, and the application of case study methodology will be analyzed. Discussion and interpretation of the results will form part of this paper with final recommendations regarding this research summarized.

Experiential Learning in Adult Education

One of the most familiar learning theories is Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984). This is based on a four stage cycle of experience, reflection, formation of concepts and generalizations and testing of actions. Kolb lists the essential characteristics of experiential learning as the following: (Sutherland, 1998):

1. Learning is a process model of learning, as opposed to a product one
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experiences
3. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between diametrically opposed adaptations to the world
4. Learning is a holistic process
5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment, and
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

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Experience, according to Dewey is also a social relationship. He sees experience as a relationship between the individual and their environment a repeatable interaction in which meanings are found. Some practitioners look to the theories of John Dewey whose notions of experiential learning offer a firm basis for the value of learning through work experience (Eames, 2000). There has been a long standing tension between educators who support theory and those who support practice. Educators using experiential learning techniques are more concerned with the use value of knowledge than its exchange value (Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995). Cooperative education placement has its foundations firmly in experiential learning and constructivist and social constructivist theory. Kolb's theory of learning alongside the sociocultural theorists of learning fit well with the whole concept of cooperative education placement.

Cooperative Education in Adult Learning

Antioch College President (1921-1936) Arthur Morgan, identified the close linkage between theory and its practical application as a transferable concept. From this, the concept of cooperative education generalized undergraduate form, was introduced by Arthur Morgan as the main focus of Antioch College Ohio, and thereby a unique American innovation in higher learning. Central to Morgan's concept was that learning and working were two essential aspects of a complete undergraduate liberal arts education. Every student was expected to participate in the 'co-op' part of the program. Student's career development was seen as important as their personal growth at Antioch. By integrating study and work over the four of five years of college curriculum graduates were prepared for work and workers prepared for further study and growth and working (Hall, 1999) Cooperative education at Antioch was at its peak from the 1940s through to the 1960s due to peak employment. By the end of the 1960s many universities were experimenting with off campus study including cooperative education. By the late 1970s in the United States even schools were introducing cooperative education programs funded by the 'School to work' programs. By the late 1990s Antioch College recognized a need to review its entire cooperative education program to meet the needs of the twenty first century. This is largely because of the rapid changes in technology. Student's can now study online while working, they can study by distance rather than attending campus which ultimately changes the role of the tertiary institute. Changes in the delivery of the program, to meet the needs of the students and employers are key to Antioch's and any other educational institute's success. Student placement programs are an alternative name for cooperative education. The popularity of industry education links like work placements offers recruiters help in providing an invaluable source of pre-selection about potential employees. As Stokes (1993, p. 87) states, "the operation of placement programs has to constitute common sense and not a charitable act for companies concerned." Employers also see placements as an opportunity to raise their company's profile while providing students with the opportunity to gain increased confidence in core skills such as communication as noted by Rawlinson and Connor (1996). Cooperative education programs are a step toward meeting the change in delivery of programs which also meet the needs of the workplace (Hall, 1999). The three way partnership in cooperative education goes a long way to ensure that graduates are flexible, confident and work ready when they finish their program of study at their chosen educational institute. A representative from Antioch University, Professor Patricia Linn presented a keynote paper at the 5th Asia Pacific Conference on Cooperative Education in Auckland titled 'Stepping into the Waterfall: How wet do students get?' The paper focused around why research around student learning is important to the field of cooperative education. Professor Linn (2004) stated that "the power of the cooperative education on students' lives came from listening to stories of alumni/ae who returned to Antioch for reunion gatherings. They remembered vividly the details of their co-op experiences, even when they struggled at times sometimes to recall what their major was." Professor Linn went on to say that after 25 years of working with co-op students at Antioch she has always been aware of the difference in students after they return from co-op. Linn stated that, "they are changed: in the way they carry themselves, the way they look us in the eye, their increased self awareness. They've done something: they've stepped into a waterfall" (p. 6).

Literature Research

Waryszak (1999) surveyed four groups of hospitality students from institutions in Melbourne, The Hague, Oxford, and Glasgow to assess their perceptions of cooperative education placement. The findings from this study indicated that there were many differences and similarities between international samples which cannot be generalized beyond the studies sampled. The findings also showed that students' expectations from cooperative education placement can be assessed in detail by measuring their expectations from the social climate of their industrial placements' work environment. The global perspective taken in this study also highlighted some cultural differences in perceptions of students which were associated to their cultural work environments. This is supported by Purcell and Quinn (1995, p. 16) who noted that "students returned from their placements more mature with considerable insight into the industry; but this insight often crystallized in disillusion and a desire to use their experience and education to find employment in another sector of the economy." This research highlights the effectiveness of the cooperative education placement to the degree that it was a real life snapshot of what to expect in the industries the student was placed in.

Another study by Waryszak (2000) focused on three international samples of students and their perceptions of the work environment in cooperative education placements in the tourism industry. The main aim of this study was to compare the earlier study mentioned in this literature research done in Melbourne on hospitality students, with those from overseas institutions. Waryszak comments on the fact that to date there is little evidence about students' perceptions of their cooperative work placement with regard to specific aspects of the job and the organization. This research confirms the need for more cross sectional and longitudinal studies to be completed across various institutions and work places. As the actual study of cooperative education placement is a relatively modern phenomenon in education this conclusion is expected.

Eakins (2000) research involved a group of final year undergraduate students from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, who completed a questionnaire regarding work context in cooperative education placements. The research comments on the diversity of cooperative education programs and the uncertainty in the literature as to whether one appropriate framework exists to develop a cooperative education curriculum. The findings from the surveys confirmed that satisfactory cooperative education placements should be structured so that they provide tasks which students see as challenging, and for which the student can take responsibility, as well as contributing to the organization.

Methodology

The case study method of research was used and centered around one student. There were a number of reasons why case study was chosen for this research. Interpretation of the data collected means that the recommendations will reflect the qualitative nature of the research. This is a contemporary research project which is bounded and these features fit well with the case study methodology. This case study falls into type one category and is a single case design which is holistic. (Yin, 1994) As depicted by Yin single case study is appropriate under three main circumstances which include; a unique or extreme case, a critical case and a revelatory case. Yin goes further to state that "single case studies may be suitable when the single case study may be conducted as a prelude to further study" (p. 39) which is where this case study would be placed. Triangulation addresses the issue of construct validity and ensures that multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 1994). This particular case study incorporated triangulation into the method by using a survey, interview and documentation as evidence for the research project

Case studies also are a step to actions. They contribute to action and their insights may be directly interpreted and put to use; for staff or individual self-development, for institutional feedback, formative evaluation and in educational policy making (Bassey, 1999). Case studies present research or evaluation data in a more publicly accessible form than other kinds of research report. The language and form of the presentation of the report is generally easier to understand and interpret than conventional research reports. The case study is therefore capable of serving multiple audiences. At its best the case study allows the reader to judge the implications of a study for himself (Simons,

1980). There is the criticism of case study research around the basis for scientific generalization. The view is that robust conclusions cannot be supported by one case study alone, hence the weakness of this method. In this case study it is recognized that it is just one case, and therefore could not be generalized across all similar situations. A further weakness of the case study method of research is the complaint that many case studies can take too long. This particular case study was conducted over a short period, which does counter this weakness.

Results

The data gathered for this research included; a questionnaire, student interview and student report based on the work placement along with an employer evaluation. The survey contained five questions and other comments: Q1. The student commented on the transfer of skill and knowledge gained from the work placement as being a positive outcome. Particularly in the areas of business accounting and front office. The student did comment on the fact that there was a general transference of knowledge in many instances; Q2. The student commented on the areas of development because of the work placement as being learning a new computer program and being able to transfer the theory from the classroom into practice; Q3. The student commented on the positive relationships built up at the work place and the experience of being able to work as a benefit. A further benefit was the ability to be able to work in a number of different areas thereby increasing practical knowledge and skills; Q4. The student commented on weaknesses of work placement which included low wages, the use of holiday time to complete the work placement and the small number of hours in certain sections of the work place; Q5. The student commented on suggestions for improvement as the opportunity to have more responsibility in a management role, and the ability to achieve a duty manager's license at no cost to the student; and, Q6. The final comment was that overall the work placement was a great opportunity to share real life examples with the students on the program, and allowed the student to take learned knowledge and skills into a work place and practice them.

The interview conducted with the student is transcribed as follows:

(Code: R= Researcher speaking, S = Student speaking, a period inside parentheses means a pause, '.5' means a short pause and a double :: means an elongated word or sound).

- R Student A you completed work placement (.) can you just tell me where you completed it please?
S Um Abbey Lodge Hotel Motel Dunedin
R Thank you (.) and how long was your placement for?
S Usually it would be eight weeks but I worked in different departments and in housekeeping you don't get enough hours so I carried it over probably about 11 or 12 weeks
R When you were at Abbey Lodge did you have a supervisor there?
S Um::m it's quite a small organization and most of my communication was with my general manager (.) but of course we had the executive housekeeper and stuff like that yeah
R You are doing the course in hospitality tourism management (.5) the degree and you are in the hotel stream (.5) you've had a lot of information knowledge and skills passed on to you during the work that you've been doing have you found that useful when you're transferring that knowledge into your work placement?
S Definitely um (.) probably the most would be the hotel stream but accounting and economics there would be instances where you have to think oh I learnt that already (.) but yeah there's quite a lot of information actually
R That's great and did it actually make you able to feel as if you had been able to put the things you learnt in theory into practice in the workplace?
S Yes definitely but (.) as I say it's very different from working in a classroom and then actually doing it in real life but especially sitting in front office when you get a complaint and you say I have learnt about complaints I know how to deal with that
R Yes
S But
R Yes (.5) and were you more confident with working in the workplace from having done a year in the hotel stream (.) did that give you more confidence?
S Um::m hard to say like I think for different areas of the hotel I could say that I had the confidence to do housekeeping because I had actually carried out my practical at the same

- hotel but its hard to pinpoint because I didn't actually do that much in front office or housekeeping whereas waitressing you know I'm not in the catering but
- R Yes (.) and would you recommend this type of study that is theory in the classroom and then an applied component to other students (.) why would you recommend that Student A?
- S Um:m especially because it's carried over two years so you've got year one and I think it's worthwhile staying at the same hotel because then you can step up and take your knowledge from the classroom into you know real like perspective(.5) I think it's excellent
- R That's great, and what were the advantages if you like of doing this course or program as opposed to a university degree at another university?
- S Because you do get the real life examples and you can go out and put what you've learned into practice and you can take away you know it's more beneficial at the end of the degree because you've got that (.5) whereas if you did a degree at university for example they've got to wait for the end and they can't walk straight into a good position whereas we've got that experience behind us as well
- R It would be beneficial for you to continue with the same work place as you've said (.) are you working there still at the moment?
- S Yes (.) yes that's the good thing we do get some more hours behind us
- R and I believe you're also paid which is an added bonus
- S Yeah definitely that's the big issue where it is cooperative education and it's not work experience as such (.) they don't have to pay you but most places tend to which is yeah I wouldn't be able to live (giggle)
- R Have the employers been um supportive of when you work in the industry with them at Abbey Lodge?
- S yeah definitely it started off with me being there for co-operative education placement but now that I've been there done that I'm now officially (giggle) part of the industry (giggle)
- R Look that's been wonderful (.) Student A do you have anything you'd like to um something that you'd like to perhaps change about the work placement (.5) are there any advice perhaps or is there anything you'd like to add that we don't do for the work placement that we don't do here?
- S Um:m not really um it is an internationally recognized degree (.) it would be good if some people some jobs thought about jobs that came up overseas and told us about them if we did want to go internationally told us about them but other than that I think it's great
- R Perhaps working with another university that has placements perhaps we could swaps you mean
- S Yeah that would be quite good and it would probably motivate us a bit more
- R And you think that international experience would be useful perhaps?
- S Yeah, yeah
- R And in terms of when you finish the degree do you have any ambition to travel at all?
- S Yes, yes straight away (giggle) I think that's probably what I will do and try and get a higher position but first I'll try and work up to get a top management position and then go overseas
- R There's a lot of debate in um educational institutions about whether a degree should be more theory than applied (.) we offer an applied theory focus so a combination um as a student going into the industry has that been the best option for you?
- S Definitely because hospitality is a people industry you have to have that with this degree there is no other way (.) it shouldn't be any other way (giggle)
- R Student A thank you for your time(.) thank you very much and this is the close of the interview.

From the above transcript of the interview the following comments were noted: The work placement over two years was positive as it allowed a building of knowledge and a possibility of moving into higher positions more swiftly, the experience was positive, more confidence had been gained due to the work placement, there was an ability to transfer knowledge learned in the classroom, the main advantage of this degree program as opposed to a non-applied degree was the inclusion of the work placement component, the employers were supportive, she felt a part of the industry because of the work placement, and she felt it would be good to have reciprocal arrangements with other universities globally to swap work placements which would add to the appeal of the program.

The student report and employer evaluation were completed while the student was participating in the work placement. The employer at the end of the work placement completed an evaluation of the student in relation to attitude, knowledge, motivation, punctuality, responsiveness and general competence in the position. The student report was a written report based on their time in the workplace and discussed the work roles and responsibilities and what they were expected to do while on placement.

There was an opportunity for them to give comment and feedback generally on the work placement which could be summarized as follows: The employer confirmed that the student participated and enjoyed the work placement and was a fantastic employee whilst out in the industry. The student in her final conclusion of the report comments on the “extremely fulfilling experience and the lifting of her self confidence.” The employer evaluation supports the student comments with the sentence “Student A has been fantastic whilst working at our business. She is a very smart and intelligent young lady who has impressed all members of staff. I have no doubt Student A will be a success in whatever she chooses to do and is a great example of Otago Polytechnic.”

Interpretation of Results

The student randomly selected to participate in this case study has provided valuable evidence to support work placement as a learning strategy. What must be confirmed from this data is that the student in this case has gained a positive learning experience from work placement which has allowed transference of knowledge from the institution to the work place and vice versa. What cannot be confirmed is that this would be the case for all students who complete work placement. As Yin (1994) has stated “case studies are not a generalization but a bounded contemporary study which supports the case in question” (p. 94). A generalization across all students who complete work placement being an effective learning strategy would not be a valid conclusion. The student has commented on the need for more scope in work placement globally which could be supported through evidence from future research. To provide further support for this study, further research would need to be conducted which includes more participants in this, or similar academic program along with the lecturers and industry employers which would change the context of the case study as stated by Yin (1994) to a multiple case study. It would be essential for reliability and validity not to shift the theoretical concerns or objectives in any future research. If these were changed and not the cases themselves, then the researcher could be accused of bias in conducting the research and interpreting the findings.

Recommendations from Conclusions

Any future research to answer the research question ‘How Effective is Work placement?– A Case Study Approach’ should include multiple sources of evidence. The purpose of this is to ensure that triangulation has occurred and this then also increases the reliability and validity of the research. Students across all streams of the degree program should be randomly selected to give a broader focus and provide more robust data along with lecturers and employers from the work place. Coupled with this a comparative study from various intakes of the degree program could be included which would provide further evidence for the research around the effectiveness of the work placement. As with all research, anonymity must be maintained to protect the identity of all participants and this should be ensured at all times. A full international literature research should be conducted, to support any future research which would also add to the weight of evidence, and support the findings (Gomm, R. & Hammersley & Foster, 2000).

Summary

Research using case study methodology must ensure that sufficient evidence is collected to answer the research question. This case study supports the effectiveness of work placement as a learning strategy for this particular student. What the case study does not confirm, is whether the same results would occur from a cross section of students who complete placement. The literature research confirms

more research that is both cross sectional and longitudinal, is essential to add to the body of knowledge around the phenomena of cooperative education. In this particular instance, further research involving more students, employers and lecturers should be conducted which would give alternative perspectives, and also provide a more compelling case study as a result. This would also increase the generalizability of the research (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000).

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