

GUIDELINES 6

PLACEMENTS IN INDUSTRY – EXPERIENCE IN THE LANCASHIRE BUSINESS SCHOOL

**P Cave
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This NLG Guideline appraises both the University and Industry approaches to placements for students undertaking tourism courses as well as giving the viewpoints of students undertaking the BA (Hons) degree course in International Tourism. It is based on the experience of the Lancashire Business School (LBS) and interviews with industry sector. It provides some suggestions which are relevant to universities, industry recruiters and the students themselves. The guideline is intended to set out suggestions for the best practice in handling placements.

Introduction

Students on four LBS courses are required to undertake a 48 week work placement in the third year of their course in an appropriate area related to their course, unless they can demonstrate that they already have achieved the level of work experience required by the course regulations. These courses include both Hospitality Management and International Tourism, For International Tourism the regulations formally stipulate that the placement should be within an organisation that is directly involved with International Tourism. There is no formal requirement that this should include management experience as this is not implicit in the title of the degree. However, many of the students' placements develop into management positions.

Background

Management experience is required for students studying for the Hospitality Management degree. This is a more vocational course designed to give students a fast track to management positions in the industry. The International Tourism course is focused on academic issues and transferable skills and is intended to make students employable in any service sector enterprise, including tourism. Here the emphasis in the placement is very much on providing awareness of the work environment and the general management problems arising in the tourism industry.

There is a dedicated Unit within the Business School managed by two full-time members of staff. In addition each course has a designated Placements Tutor.

Organisation for the Placement

Placements Unit

Although the students do not go on placement until their third year, the majority of the work of the Placements Unit is concentrated in the second year of the programme. It cannot be over-emphasised that students' experience in preparing CVs and applying for job opportunities at this stage is very limited. They often have unrealistic expectations on the nature of job opportunities.

The role of the Placements Unit is to maintain an active liaison role between the University, student and the company. It is responsible for getting company information (e.g. placement opportunities) to students, getting student information (e.g. applications) to companies, arranging interviews (either at LBS or at the company's premises as preferred by the company) and keeping track of each student's progress in applying for a placement. In addition, the Placements Unit maintains a Placements Workshop, where information on student placements is displayed and where students can 'sign up' for those opportunities that are of interest to them.

Contact with Employers

The Business School has a network with local, national and international employers. As the International Tourism degree is fairly recent it is taking time to build up contacts, but more tourism employers are now becoming involved. Initial mailing shots were prepared by using an employee database from a CD ROM programme on the University's network computer and targeting selected employers.

Some employers prefer to deal with students directly, whilst many prefer a centralised unit to co-ordinate the links between the company and the students. In many cases employers will visit the Business School, perhaps to carry out preliminary interviews, or to undertake final selection. In all cases employers are dealt with in a professional manner, car parking facilities are made available, correspondence is dealt with promptly and students understand exactly what is expected of them. A buffet lunch is provided at which employers can meet the students and staff informally.

A CV is kept centrally for each student. This cuts down the administrative load for the students as they then only sign for the placement they are interested in and CVs of all interested students are then forwarded to employers by a designated deadline. Students are required to submit a letter of application if this is required by the employer. Some employers, especially for overseas placements, require a personal statement by the student to be included on their CV. Students are given guidance by their tutors on what this should contain.

Students might also approach companies directly, although this meets with more limited success.

Placement Tutor

There is not such a clearly defined role for the placements tutor and the amount of time that can be dedicated to placements will depend on the overall resource of the parent department. The most important role for the tutor is to ensure quality control of work sent out. Good practice results where the following arrangements are made:

- Write to all end year 1 students over the Summer vacation at their home address to request preparation of a professional CV and offering feedback if draft CV submitted. Provision of assistance in Year 2 with CV preparation. This should highlight both experience and achievement. *Students are not admitted into the placements process (i.e. applications forwarded on the student's behalf) until their CV has been approved by the placements tutor.*
- A regular timetable commitment is made in the second year to discuss placements in the form of a 'workshop' session.
- Preparation by the students for approaching companies and preparing for interviews by accessing information from the World-Wide-Web and CD ROMs through the academic computer network.

Other Support Mechanism

The BA (Hons) Business Studies course offers an assessed module on 'Preparation for Placement'. This is also useful in terms of seeking future employment. It includes exercise in preparing CVs, job applications, a standard application form, undertaking a graduate level interview and working on a case study as an interviewee and interviewer. Thirty per cent of the performance in the practice interview is based on peer assessment. There is a Personal Development Programme which reviews the student's performance on the placement programme and develops further skills for career planning.

For other courses, workshops are organised to help students in their CV preparation and to give advice on interview techniques. Further career development modules are planned which will be open to International Tourism students.

International Tourism Placements

It is easier for students to find placements in the hospitality sector than in tourism. This is especially true of overseas placements, where accommodation is provided for hotel based students, but tourism students might normally have to meet their own accommodation costs. These overseas links arise from existing partnerships through the Socrates programme or through collaboration in research, consultancy or training.

From LBS experience to date the following conclusions may be reached:

- Placement fatigue is characteristic of many tourism employers in the UK and Western Europe who already have established networks with a limited number of universities.
- The competitive nature of the packaged holiday business has led, in some cases, to fewer opportunities for placements. Many offers have been for tele-sales work, but these have been seasonal and short term.
- Major overseas hotel chains, or their managing agents in destinations where tourism has expanded rapidly, are prepared to accept tourism students especially for front-of-house duties.
- Approaches to niche market operators are well worth trying as the major tour operators are overwhelmed with requests for placements.
- Limited opportunities are available in local branches of UK travel agencies.
- An invitation for tourism employers to meet students who are specialising in Information Technology or Marketing covered by other courses within the Business School may make a visit seem more worthwhile.

Following the successful offer of a placement the LBS considers that it is important for the student to be visited at least twice during their third, placement year. Students are not allowed to go on placement to an overseas location, where it would not be possible for a tutor to visit.

The Placement Year

Good practice on the visit involves:

- A written guide for new visiting tutors.
- Drawing up a visit programme for the placements tutor and colleagues.
- Maintaining a liaison with the company and the student.
- Formalising both visit and reporting procedures. Employers are asked to provide a confidential report on the student's ability and progress. This may be in the form of an oral report to the visiting tutor without the student being present.
- Encouraging the student to prepare for the next academic year and in particular the dissertation topic for their final year.
- Arranging a de-briefing workshop for placement students at the University during the academic year. In part this is intended to warn students of any cultural shock when they return to an intensive programme of academic studies during their final year. This should also involve some final year students who have returned from placement. This is more difficult when the majority of students are placed overseas as is currently the position for International Tourism and Hospitality Management degrees at LBS.

These arrangements have served LBS students well. Potential providers who have been seeking students have frequently been disappointed.

Employers' Viewpoints

Employer's views were sought in a number of key areas concerning placement:

Student Approach

"the key thing from working with students is attitude. If a person comes in with the right attitude, they understand that they are going to be doing everything, they are not going to be a manager within two months, they have got to start at the bottom, be prepared to really muck in, involved in incredibly boring work to start with"

First impressions are all important. The student is expected to have undertaken research on the company and the sector in which it operates. Students must also be prepared to show flexibility in where they are going to work. This is after all the travel industry.

The Times (1997) indicates how students are giving the wrong impression in their covering letters accompanying their CV. In some cases these are presented on pages torn out of spiral notebooks, but most commonly contain spelling errors in the name of the contact or assume the sex of the person they are corresponding with.

How Universities can Assist this Process?

"We would hope that universities/colleges would try to ensure that the student would be suitable for ongoing employment with us as experience has shown that students with inappropriate personalities end up wasting their time."

Most students are employed at the 'front end' of the business and interpersonal qualities, including appearance, are of paramount importance. A copy of a course programme to potential placement providers might be useful, although students would be encouraged to include a list of the modules they are taking in their CV. This would help the company to give a successful student the tasks to which they are best suited.

Universities should also give advice on the skills needed for the work placement. For example, if a student is thinking of working in the hotel sector, does he or she have the background knowledge that is needed, or does his or her interest lie in an area which is irrelevant?

Many students want to work in 'marketing', but experience shows that such opportunities are limited. The student should also be encouraged to explore with the placement provider the exact nature of the duties that they will be undertaking, and any opportunities for working in other areas. For example in timeshare developments the hotel and marketing operations are distinctly separate.

There is a feeling in the industry sector that universities are preparing too many degree students who often have unrealistic expectations. Some institutions are providing more skills-based courses, which include training on Galileo.

Basic Skills

"Basic skills in dealing with customers, taking pride in personal appearance, numeracy and grammar. Personal qualities must be willingness to learn and work their way up".

Previous experience in the industry was also mentioned although, recognising that many graduates are quite naïve in the working environment, many employers will provide the necessary training.

It is quite clear that for tourism students there are more placement opportunities in the hospitality than the tourism sector. Students do accept this, but also need to have in mind their final career goal in competing for a placement.

Placement Timing/Length

Companies were generally flexible about the date that they take on students. There is likely to be a demand for students in May, although this date may not suit a number of institutions. For students starting placements in the hospitality sector timing was not generally a problem.

A short-term (2 to 5 week) placement was likely to be of very limited benefit to the employer. As a result, students on such placements may have to accept manual

office duties. One company felt that the ideal length of placement was 3 months. The problem with a one year placement is the student who has settled in well might want to get on with their career, rather than return to university.

Job Opportunities

"We have a person managing one of our biggest operations in London now, who came to us six years ago ... he had the right attitude"

A good placement experience will often lay the foundation for a successful career in the industry, either through providing necessary experience, or through the student returning to work with the placement provider. Course tutors and students need to make their own judgements on how relevant the experience will be to future employment prospects.

Students need to be flexible in terms of location and bear in mind the size of the company where they are based for the placement. Smaller companies are unlikely to have dedicated graduate training programmes. Some companies have been cutting back on such schemes. Where these do exist in large companies, competition is very intensive and they are open to graduates of all disciplines. Employers themselves concede that recruitment policies may not reflect the high number of middle achievers now coming through higher education.

Another problem is that students really need to seize the opportunities as they come up:

"A smaller company has to be an extremely fast-mover. An opportunity might not be there in 6 months time."

In general student recruitment into management jobs in tourism is limited and these jobs are also open to all graduates and not just those taking tourism degrees. The hospitality sector in the UK recruits rather more graduates from vocationally based courses than does the tourism sector and there are further opportunities for a first appointment in the hospitality sector overseas, especially for those who have completed an international placement.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Employing Placement Students

"there is a risk of taking someone who is 'no good' and wasting a year on them"

Some companies absorb students into their permanent staffing and as such they are entitled to the same terms and conditions as regular staff e.g. bonuses or commission. Other companies admit that a student is an extra 'pair of hands' and as such they can undertake tasks that the normal staffing would not be able to do. A student is relatively cost effective and able to bring new ideas.

Employers do not always appreciate that students are naïve about the industry and might expect too much. There is inevitably a hidden cost in terms of time. However, there are examples of the company feeling that they were losing a valuable resource when the student left. Good students are frequently accepted as any other staff member and entitled to the same conditions of service, including travel benefits.

Previous experience in tourism was often the driving force behind students' desires to do a tourism related degree. Other motives were a general interest in travel, a desire to travel abroad and what seemed to be the natural progression from the Advanced level GNVQ in Leisure and Tourism. Students considered that by acquiring a better knowledge they would then be in a better position to go into the industry and when opportunities arose.

"The real reason was that before I started I had a holiday to New Zealand ... that was the force which started it"

Student Expectations

Comments received at student Open Days suggest that students are being given unrealistic expectations about career opportunities in the industry. This seems most apparent from students who have studied the GNVQ in Leisure and Tourism.

“A lot of people coming out of colleges have this idea of working as Travel Agents and travel education trips ... do whatever you want almost ... it's an easy career ... it's not like that at all it's a hard slog.”

All the 40 students responding to a questionnaire to first and second year students studying tourism at LBS felt that the placement was a relevant part of the course. Some first year students had a fairly general expectation about finding a career and hoped that by the second and final year they would be able to decide on a more specific area. Others had gained the impression from people working in the industry that a degree was important to progress more quickly up the ladder. However, there were mixed and often realistic views about the value of the placement in the degree course providing a pathway for a future career in the industry.

There has been some disappointment, expressed by those students looking specifically for a career in the tourism sector, about the limited number of placement opportunities in tourism. Many of the placement opportunities at LBS are in hospitality operations as distinct from tourism. However, many tourism students have since become interested in these placements with multinational hotel chains in Greece, USA and the Far East.

“I wanted to work for an airline and I still do and it has got to the bit of a disappointment stage in realising that there are hundreds more people trying to go for the same job”

Recommendations For Colleges/Universities

Tourism courses have expanded rapidly in recent years. The NLG estimates (Middleton & Ladkin, 1996) that in 1995/96, 43 institutions, mostly new universities, offered 75 tourism and related degree courses of which 42 were bachelor degrees. The NLG has estimated that 4415 students (including postgraduates) enrolled on tourism courses in 1995/96, which means they by the year 2000 there will be a probable output of over 4000 graduates a year. From what has already been noted about career opportunities it is likely that only a relatively small proportion of these graduates will find employment in the tourism sector. This will not be a great surprise to many in the university sector, who have been emphasising the importance of transferable skills to students applying for tourism degree courses.

- Career Advisers/Tutors particularly in the Further Education sector should not foster unrealistic expectations about placement or career opportunities in tourism.
- Consideration should be given to making courses more vocationally orientated, as far example providing training on the Galileo CRS. Non-degree routes should be considered.
- Universities need to continue to work closely with the industry sector. (See NLG Guideline No.5 *Making Connections between Industry and Higher Education in Tourism.*)
- Where it does not exist a dedicated Placements Unit should look after placement administration.
- Students need to be given help/guidance in preparation of CVs/interview techniques/career planning. A dedicated module could enable both staff and students to do this within the course programme.
- The hospitality sector must be considered as a viable alternative source of placements for tourism students and course programmes adjusted accordingly, perhaps with a common first year enabling students to specialise later in their course when they become more aware of the job market.

- Consideration should be given to setting up an alumni arrangement which should provide a greater prospect for potential placement opportunities in the future. (One of the former hospitality students at LBS has recently requested a placement student to work at an Irish Bar in a hotel in Abu Dhabi!)
- There is scope to create a networking arrangement between universities teaching tourism or an arrangement to bring about the pooling of 'surplus' placement opportunities. These are most likely to be overseas. This would need co-ordinating.

For Industry

Most employers are committed to giving whatever opportunities they can to students. However, sometimes students who approach employers are disappointed by a totally negative response. Employers should consider the following:

- Students are all potential customers and employees in their future lives.
- Staff turnover in the tourism industries is higher than average. Tourism students have a dedicated interest in the industry and might be expected to have a higher commitment.
- Students are generally not familiar with the industry or the working environment and do need support.
- Not all students aspire to reach managerial positions. Job satisfaction and a good working environment within their chosen industry is as important to many. Employers in the tourism sector should consider recruitment and a training programme directed at the non-'high flyers' graduating from the expanded higher education sector.
- Career systems in the industry need to be communicated more effectively to further and higher education.

For Students

The main skills requirements wanted by the industry from tourism students are:

- Adaptability
- Creativity
- Initiative
- Interpersonal Sensitivity
- Participation (Team Focused)
- Planning and Organising
- Spoken and Written Communication
- Numeracy

Students must be flexible in what they are going to do and in location. The way the travel industry is organised in the UK, means that there are relatively few opportunities to work in 'marketing', for example. The industry trains people from within and it is unrealistic for students to expect that they can reach managerial responsibilities within a few months. If it is management experience that students are seeking then the hospitality sector may be a far better option.

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Acknowledgements

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