

## **GUIDELINES 8**

### **BEST PRACTICE IN TOURISM PLACEMENTS**

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#### **Introduction**

The past 10 years has seen a rapid increase in the provision of tourism courses in UK Universities. The number of institutions offering tourism courses has risen from 15 in 1991/92 to some 50 today (Middleton and Ladkin, 1996). This has led to a substantial rise in the number of tourism graduates. Many of the students are on sandwich courses, where students spend up to a year (normally 48 weeks) on placement, either in the UK or overseas. The expansion of undergraduate tourism courses has not been matched by the provision of suitable placements in the tourism industry. Employers have often been wary of taking on University students, fearing that the level of work provided will not be suitable. This has resulted in the inevitable concerns expressed by students that they cannot find a job in the industry without suitable experience and where do they find the experience? Many tourism students have had to accept placements in the hospitality sector.

The experience of those companies in the travel and tourism sector, where there is a placement programme has been very positive. Comments received from companies by tutors visiting students have been:

- Students have a greater sense of loyalty;
- Students push themselves ahead more within the organisation and are keen to learn;
- Students are more productive.

The benefits to students who return from a successful work placement include:

- Identifying the relevance to the industry of their final year subjects;
- Gathering knowledge and information which helps them to define a problem for their final year dissertation/project and in some cases being able to gather primary research material;
- The necessary experience and expertise to prepare for a career in the industry.

This guideline looks at the experience of three companies in the tourism and leisure sector, one which has recruited students since 1982 and another a relative newcomer. It is aimed at employers who currently employ students and those who may be considering taking a student for work placement. Each company has a different approach to student placements and each provides a different type of experience. A number of common features of good practice by these three companies are summarised at the end of this guideline.

#### **Austravel**

Austravel is a travel organiser and is part of the Port Phillip Group, which has interests in the USA, UK, Germany and Australia. Within Port Phillip there are two brands; Austravel, the direct sell operation and Ausbound which sells to the trade. The

company is the UK market leader in arranging holidays to Australia and New Zealand. The Head Office is in London and there are a number of regional offices.

### **Recruitment**

Austravel began recruiting higher education students from the then Dorset Institute of Higher Education in 1982. Recruitment is initiated by letters direct from students (about 10%) or by direct liaison with a number of institutions. Despite expressing some concern about the quality of tourism course provision in some universities, Austravel has recently been increasing the number of institutions from which it recruits. The company does not restrict its placement positions to tourism students and some positions require a specialist knowledge of marketing and information technology skills.

Contact is made with the university, generally now through a placements adviser. The company then sends details of what it is likely to have available together with details of the sort of people that they are looking to employ. Preliminary interviews, normally on an individual basis, follow a presentation held at the university department. Students who are successful at the preliminary stage are informed and invited to attend a second interview from January onwards. This includes a visit to the London Head Office, meetings and interviews with managers and current students. Students give a short presentation and a formal interview is held with the Sales Director and one other senior manager. The company is able to build up a picture of student attitude.

### **The Placement**

Each office usually has at least one placement. The placement is not viewed as an opportunity to go round the whole organisation. Placements are in a sales support and ticketing role with students working in a team with sales consultants undertaking administrative functions to enable each sale to be processed smoothly. It is possible for students to learn more about the work of a particular department if there is an interest shown. There may also be an opportunity to progress to a sales consultancy role. Training is provided throughout the placement, which gives students the opportunity to work with other employees, which can provide a valuable insight into the organisation. The company assists students with their project/dissertation preparation. There is a potential benefit from the project to Austravel, provided that the work is kept within manageable boundaries. The ability to work in teams is of considerable importance. Students are treated as employees.

### **Induction and Training**

There is a formal induction of two to three weeks concerned with the Company's role, its operations, health and safety and legal obligations. Students are generally ignorant on subjects such as consumer law and specific travel legislation. Much of the day-to-day work has a large legal element to it. Training includes technical (reservations), personal and management skills. There is a great deal of information to be absorbed and assimilated before students can commence work. It is expected that students would have had some previous contact with reservation systems; e.g. Galileo. A company newsletter exposes students to a wider scenario. There are opportunities to learn Galileo, legal matters and to improve presentation and general management skills.

## **Appraisal**

In addition to any supervision by the University there is a staff appraisal twice a year after six months and on completion of the placement. There is a three to four week probationary period post induction. Within the company a member of staff acts as a mentor, makes informal checks prior to appraisal and gives feedback on performance. Students do have to learn to cope working in a pressurised environment at busy times of the year. The company wishes to formalise the process of contact should problems arise. Deficiencies are identified and in exceptional circumstances warnings would be issued.

## **Future Plans**

The company is introducing a sponsorship scheme. First year students apply for sponsorship and if successful they spend a period of observation with the company. They will then be guaranteed a placement for one year and, on returning to university for their final year, receive a bursary and a guarantee of employment on graduation.

For these and other students there is an opportunity to 'fast-track' through a six month Career Development Programme. From here it is possible to progress to supervisory and management positions within eighteen months of joining the company.

## **Business Pursuits**

Business Pursuits is a small corporate event management company based near Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, which organises team building activities, and a variety of events, for example conferences, party planning and outdoor activities.

## **Recruitment**

The company has employed one student, but this is likely to increase as it is anticipated that demand will expand into the Millennium. The company is able to provide a good range of work and the student's output is high. Students have tended to approach the company on their own initiative. Three or four people are interviewed each year.

## **The Placement**

Students spend five months in event management, which is the core activity, two months in sales, one month in finance and one month with Intensive Productions, a subsidiary based in London. After experiencing the whole range of departments, students return to the event management operations where there are set objectives and the opportunity to see projects through. Work is very varied and covers the whole range of the industry from setting up equipment through to sales and finance. Mundane tasks such as filling envelopes are a very small part of the work. A monthly programme is planned in advance rather than moving to departments where there is a need for an extra pair of hands. Business Pursuits appeals to outdoor types. The company needs students who have self-confidence together with the ability to get along with others.

As Business Pursuits is a small company the opportunities for progression are mainly from taking on increasing levels of responsibility, under supervision, especially towards the end of the placement. As an Event Assistant a student would be responsible for ensuring that all details in the proposal are delivered to specification.

Students need to demonstrate that they have the right aptitude, for quality and safety reasons, before they would be allowed to take responsibility for events.

### **Induction and Training**

There is no formal induction apart from introductions to people in different departments. Advice is given on dissertation topics and there would be an opportunity for students to follow up lines of enquiry at a future date. There might be a good overlap between the placement and the course, for example in terms of strategic management.

Much of the training is on-the-job shadowing and observation. There are product and instructor training days and an opportunity to attend the annual company conference, which includes negotiation skills training. The conference would enable someone to gain an overall perspective of the company. Students would also attend weekly department meetings and department training events.

### **Appraisal**

The company has formalised its appraisal process and six monthly reviews are undertaken for all staff. The appraisal invites comments on achievements a person is most proud of in the past six months, how the objectives set in the last review have been achieved, what has helped or hindered and the level of morale. It also invites people to say where they see themselves in twelve months time and at least three key objectives to be achieved in the next six months. This is then reviewed with the appropriate manager and objectives for the next six months are agreed.

An informal conversation takes place every time the student changes department. On starting a department, goals and objectives are set as a job description and at the conclusion of work in that department the student writes a report. This forms the basis for a debriefing discussion. This happens on four or five occasions. The university may also provide an appraisal form. It is also important to recognise that any deficiencies may not be the student's fault and could in part be due to a lack of information and support provided by the company. An understanding needs to be reached as to why things did not always work out. A wrap up session is held at the end of the placement.

Mentoring is the responsibility of the department manager, but depending on the individual, informal chats could be had with someone at Director level.

### **Future Plans**

Business Pursuits is still on a learning curve in terms of placement students. An opportunity for students to gain a wider understanding of the industry might be given in terms of attending the major industry exhibitions and learning more about the competitive environment through placing a student in a client's office or with a competitor for a week. The company concurs that it has benefited considerably from taking on a student and as a small company has worked out a plan for the year which, with modifications in respect to experience, has worked well.

### **Superbreak**

Superbreak is the leading short-break operator in the UK with offices in York. Holidays are sold either through travel agents or by direct sales to the customer. The individual brands comprise Superbreak and Goldenrail. Other products include a luxury hotel collection aimed at the more professional market and airport and theatre break brochures. In 1995 Superbreak and Goldenrail were acquired by Eurocamp Plc.

### **The Placement**

Students are employed full-time as reservations advisers, but also work for one to two weeks in other departments to see how the business links together. The students work for one to two weeks in Operations, Marketing Services, (responsible for brochure production), Sales and Marketing, Customer Relations and Accounts departments. Sales and Marketing have a number of work experience students from YorkTec for two to three weeks who want to get an overview of sales and the placement students assist with this. At three months students are trained at putting rooms onto the system through using the database. At around six months students are shown how to do amendments and cancellations. After six to nine months the students are given the opportunity to take on the role of the training clerk themselves.

Assistance is given to the students in connection with their dissertation projects if this is appropriate. Educational and sales promotion visits are held throughout the first year to places such as London, Edinburgh, Chester and Warwick Castle. Students also have the opportunity to participate in a Careers Fair.

At the end of their placement period Superbreak feel that the students should have a good idea of what the UK short break business and working in the industry is really like. Whilst with the company they are treated both as adults and as equals to other members of staff.

### **Recruitment**

An outline of the placement responsibility is given to universities who contact the company and students are asked to forward their CVs, either through a placements officer or direct to Superbreak. On the basis of the CV students are invited to interview and have the opportunity to see the offices and receive advice on local accommodation. A list of accommodation agencies is available. Interviews normally start in February with a view to finalising the offers by the middle of April.

### **Induction and Training**

The Personnel and Training Manager gives a full induction to all students. There is an introduction to the company, hours of work, health and safety, fire safety, catering arrangements, illness etc. An introduction/training checklist is kept in each student's file. This also forms part of the six week appraisal. A rotation is worked out for each student to spend time in different departments.

There is a two-week period of off-the-job training, learning the basics. After training each student is allocated a reservations training clerk and spends two days listening into calls. There is often an opportunity to check availability and to do live costing on screen and the student also talks with the caller. At this stage the training clerk remains with them. Students are encouraged to say "I am just going to check with my supervisor, I am on training". The complexity of the product makes it difficult to learn

the job in just two weeks. When sufficient confidence has been gained the student takes full responsibility for the booking.

After 12 weeks everyone is monitored and there are ongoing training sessions. Training is given on all the popular locations to try to help staff to sell and to offer alternatives. Hotels also give presentations. Students are given every encouragement to deal with problems themselves, but to seek advice or assistance when needed. Training sessions are given in response to the needs of the business, sometimes in response to needs identified from call monitoring. They last for about half an hour and are given on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.

### **Appraisal**

Assessment takes place at six weeks. A form is completed, prior to the appraisal. General performance criteria are attendance, timekeeping, appearance and ability to work with other members of the team. In addition a checklist is completed for calls monitored and feedback received from the team leader. These deal with telephone techniques including answering the call, 'smiling' on the telephone, being able to lead the call, offer an alternative, closing the sale and conversation to a booking.

At 12 weeks the appointment is confirmed, as is the case for all staff. There is a salary increase upon confirmation of employment, which is the same pay as for all reservations advisers. Salaries are reviewed yearly and if there is a pay increase students receive this as well. An incentive bonus is also paid.

The Training and Personnel Manager acts as a mentor for the students. If students say that they have an interest in a particular area they will certainly have an opportunity to go back and visit that department. The initiative is left to the students.

### **Future Plans**

The company is increasing the number of student placements in response to planned expansion. The work will continue to be in reservations but there is an overall commitment to meeting the needs of the student and to give students an insight into all aspects of the business operation.

### **Students' Comments**

The feedback from students who have participated in placements in all the above companies has generally been very positive. There are inevitably the occasional niggles but these often stem from a lack of initial understanding about the nature of the work in the tourism sector, which the placement itself is intended to correct. Students are asked to prepare a report at the end of their placement year highlighting what they have gained from the experience. A selection of comments is given below:

*"The benefits of this work placement have been immense both in self-awareness and skills development. I was intimidated by team work, but within the first three months that had vanished. I can now work confidently within a team."*

*“I had a general knowledge of the functions of a CRS but had never used one. As the training progressed I was aware of how little I knew about both the reservation process and a CRS”*

*“Concentration was essential as everything confirmed on the system (ATOP) become live immediately”*

*“I was allowed to take control of the jobs I was allocated and I enjoyed the responsibility of this”*

### **Summary of Best Practice**

The three companies mentioned above all share common elements of good practice. In summary these are:

Students are treated as full-time employees. Students enjoy the same pay, leave entitlement and conditions of service as all other members of staff. Help is given to enable students to assimilate into the working environment as employers recognise that the placement might be the first full-time employment that a student has undertaken. The placements are all relevant to the course and an agenda for the placement is set at the beginning of the year and maintained.

An induction and training programme is arranged to give students all the information required to take responsibility for a task. Gaps in a students' knowledge, for example, legal and technical background, are filled in. None of the companies reviewed impose too much pressure at the outset although all set challenging tasks and provide a degree of job satisfaction. Students are therefore able to gain confidence at an early stage and feel that they could approach colleagues for information. Progression within a company is in terms of increased levels of responsibility.

Appraisal is undertaken in the same way as it would be conducted for all other staff in the company. The development of mutual respect is of paramount importance and students are given credit for achievements ranging from praise for tasks well done to bonus pay.

All companies avoid asking students to undertake menial tasks, over and above what others in the company might be expected to do, even when there are pressures in departments other than those in which the students is working.

Students are given a broad understanding of all aspects of the business even though their main work might be within one or two departments. They are then able to take away an accurate view of what is really like to work in the industry. Students are generally able to take part in external visits and all companies are open to suggestions gaining knowledge of areas in which they were especially interested.

The development of mutual respect is of paramount importance and this is a feature of all the companies. Assistance is provided with dissertations and projects as well as advice on long term career goals. Giving small projects with achievable short-term goals is felt to be a means to achieve this. Contact between the student, employer and university is maintained throughout the placement.

## **Conclusion**

The author has noted a discernable change in attitude among employers towards placement students during the six years that he has been working in higher education. Turning aside initial concerns about the over-provision of tourism courses, more employers are now actively recruiting tourism students during their sandwich placement year. These students have a good general knowledge of the industry and a keen commitment to hard work. Students are not looking to usurp management positions and today have a much more realistic expectation of the nature of the work in the industry. Some employers are positively encouraging students to return to permanent employment after their final year. This theme has been taken up by British Airways, which is seeking ways to retain those students who performed well in their placement, but who may not be successful in applying for the very competitive graduate recruitment programme.

The continuing high levels of staff turnover, coupled with the recognition by many companies that much more needs to be done in terms of customer service is also encouraging more tourism employers to look to the higher education sector for staff. A recruitment programme targeting graduates who have completed successful placements can be very cost effective.

## **References**

Middleton, VTC., and Ladkin, A., 1996, The Profile of Tourism Studies Degree Courses in the UK: 1995/6, The National Liaison Group Guideline No.4, The Tourism Society, London.