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Co-creating learning experiences to support student employability in travel and tourism

Introduction

The development of employability skills has been extensively noted as a critical factor shaping the Higher Education sector and underpinning student expectations of their University degrees (HEA, 2017; Asonitou, 2015; Dacre Pool and Sewer, 2007). This results from a stronger emphasis placed on students and graduates that achieve tangible results in the task of securing relevant jobs in the industries that they studied (Eurico *et al.*, 2015). In light of this, the case of a specific modular programme of study that focuses on employment and employability in travel and tourism is hereby presented. The employability skills that the module aims to develop include: the ability to write effective CVs and professional cover letters, taking aptitude and psychometric tests, confidently participating in group assessments and succeeding at panel job interviews as the module mirrors current recruitment and selection schemes (Edenborough, 2005; Paulhus *et al.*, 2013). This programme benefits from the input of a range of perspectives that synergically deliver its contents and support its assessment strategy using a collaborative approach to delivering learning experiences (Kumar, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2013). This is accomplished by different relevant contributors that co-deliver the module contents enriching the spectrum of perspectives that students learn from (Haddara and Skanes, 2007; Weisz and Chapman, 2004). In addition, an experiential approach is implemented to assess their engagement with the module and the development of employability skills, including performance at job interviews, group assessments and written tests in line with current industrial practice (Eckhaus *et al.*, 2017).

In view of this framework, the overall aim of this study is to evaluate the contribution of this module in the task of supporting the students' journey towards employment. Given the co-creative and experiential nature of the module contents and assessment regime, the research objectives are: 1. To understand the value of using a collaborative approach in delivering employability curricula; and 2. To evaluate the use of experiential learning assessment techniques in the task of supporting student employability. The pedagogical approach known as experiential learning has been widely used in tourism education research in the context of work-based learning (King and Zhang, 2017; Mak *et al.*, 2017; Čavlek, 2015). However, the

application of this approach in developing students that are confident when applying for employment and participating in assessment centres to secure jobs is an area that requires attention given its implications for the employment prospects of University graduates (George, 2015). This legitimizes the need to evaluate the efficacy of using experiential learning tools that result in students with a range of knowledge and skills (Fernandez-Rio *et al.*, 2017; Dixon and Daly, 2017) that materialize in success when attending recruitment and selection events in the travel and tourism industries (Ruhanen, 2006).

Experiential learning and collaborative teaching: Conceptual framework

Teaching and learning methods that draw from the principles of experiential learning relate to Kolb's (1984) approach which brings together the idea that learning is best understood as a process and not as an outcome. It encompasses a continuum of experiences leading the author to conclude that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p38). This stance indicates that learning outcomes are positively addressed by understanding and reflecting on the different elements that ultimately result in these experiences. El Hanandeh (2016) also supports the notion of learning as a process, notes that "the learner grasps knowledge either through concrete experience or abstract conceptualisation and then transforms it either through reflective observation or active experimentation". In this sense, the focus on practical elements of programmes of study that support student employability benefit from using approaches to tackling job interviews for example. This is the case of Whitacre's (2007) STAR technique whereby details of Situations, Tasks, Actions and Results are provided in response to job interview questions making a case for a candidate's background and experience in line with the requirements of a job. The approach is effective because it puts the students in the role of active participants as opposed to passive observers (Armstrong, 2003; Kennedy, 2010). This in turn allows them to reflect on their performance at business simulations applied to recruitment and selection schemes used in the travel and tourism industries (Kitterlin-Lynch *et al.*, 2015). Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) also positively appraise the value of reflection on experiential learning opportunities that along with a student's degree, skills and attributes can engender self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy; which are essential in the quest for employment (Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013).

In regards to reflection and its role in experiential learning, the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) notes that the simplest definition of Experiential Education is '*Challenge and*

Experience followed by *Reflection* leading to *Learning and Growth*' (AEE, 2017). This approach sits in line with Gledhill and Smith (2013) who, in describing their 'Supported Challenge' approach in work-based learning assert that students are inducted into an environment in which they:

- Take responsibility for their learning and are encouraged to challenge themselves in an ongoing process of gathering skills and knowledge
- Accept that their learning styles are constantly developing, and that their reflection on learning leads to growth (see Marton and Saljo, 1976)
- Come to appreciate that the purpose of the whole enterprise is to study, learn and grow across all dimensions of life - personal as well as professional

Eckhaus *et al.* (2017) note the value of the use of 'game' techniques in developing student experiential learning. The ability of a game to draw students into active participation is noted, as is the concept of 'challenge' which lies at the heart of such activity (Kennedy, 2010). Experiential learning requires the investment of time and energy on the part of the learner, and an engagement which is wholehearted and committed. McCarthy (2016:92) notes that in Kolb's (1984) approach to experiential learning, "the learner must continually choose which set of learning abilities to use in a specific learning situation." Whilst this is accepted, the process may in some cases be subconscious and automatic. This is because some learners will appreciate the choices as they are made, and only perhaps with hindsight and reflection might they appreciate what lays behind their preferences. The engagement with learning will be self-driven and, although this may be partly as a result of perceived extrinsic benefits, it can only thrive where the drive becomes intrinsic. Reeve (1989) noted that central to intrinsic motivation are competence, self-determination and excitement, and these are all qualities which experiential learning will encourage.

In spite of the tangible benefits of applying an experiential approach to learning and teaching (Ruhanen, 2006), Moon (2004) identifies some of the issues and challenges of defining experiential learning in a way that can be universally accepted. The author highlights the interface between culture and the interpretation of experience (also identified as a topic of interest in tourism education by Mejia *et al.*, 2017). In this respect, Moon (2004) challenges the idea that experience can be divorced from those meanings placed upon it by the individual as mediated through their local culture. This is noted in George's (2015) work, who coupled

an entrepreneurial enterprise with relevant work placements. The students were required to journal their experiences, and in so doing to reflect upon them in the cultural context in which they were gathered. This gave students a sense of having developed a wide range of skills and capabilities - from the very practical, to enhanced affective appreciation (Christie *et al.*, 2008). For the purpose of this study, an emphasis is placed on existing cultures within the travel and tourism sector. Some traits of this sector as identified by the UNWTO (2010) include: competitiveness, dynamism and diversity; all of which are at the core of the module contents and assessment regime as detailed in further sections (see Beggs *et al.*, 2008). Moon (2004) also acknowledges the value of Anderson *et al.*'s (1995) evaluation of the purpose of experience-based learning. The authors suggest this is for learners to 'appropriate' "something that is to them personally significant or meaningful. This is sometimes spoken of in terms of the learning being true to the lived experience of learners" (Anderson *et al.*, 1995:226). In view of this, their 'means' of experience-based learning can also be measured in line with the contexts of learning that this employability focused module aims to engender as noted in the case study section.

Strange and Gibson (2017) note the links between experiential and transformative education, suggesting in particular that in 'going beyond the comfort zone' a student is enabled to change their perspectives. Therefore, an effective programme of study that develops employability skills should provide such an opportunity by using module contents and assessment strategies that put students into testing situations in which they need to act, react, respond and then reflect. In this sense and as discussed below, the programme that this study focuses on, from its inception, is designed to help students develop the attitudes, skills and capabilities to make those transformations. This developmental process (McCarthy, 2016) is rooted in their personal motivation to pursue a degree in the travel and tourism fields with the objective of securing the job of their preference leading to career paths in these industries (see Robinson *et al.* 2016; Reeve, 1989). These frameworks align to Kumar's (2007) SOAR approach to student employability as students firstly undertake Self-assessments that measure their levels of *Motivation* (including beliefs, interests and attitudes), their existing *Abilities* (including skills and competencies) along with their *Personality* traits. This Self-MAP as described by Kumar (2010 in Atlay, 2010:28) allows students to develop a realistic sense of self-awareness in relation to their present situation and hence of their job prospects. This in turn leads them to examine the career Opportunities currently available in the jobs market through research and exploration that allows them to develop an understanding of the skills required to secure their

preferred job (Kumar in HEA, 2015). This knowledge then roots their Aspirations to pursue these opportunities by planning development goals and fulfilling the requirements needed as students “adopt strategies for making sound, informed choices - and develop these progressively for future re-use” (Kumar, 2007:28). As these aspirations are pursued through effective job applications and performances at assessment centres, they materialise in tangible Results when they succeed in securing the work opportunities of their choice. This process is hence rooted in experience and therefore the cycle of reflective experiential learning starts over leading to career progression and development.

It is because of the wide ranging set of skills that play critical roles in a student’s ability to succeed at recruitment events that an effective module delivery and assessment regime should rely on a variety of input from different perspectives. In the context of this module and as detailed in the case study section; academics, industry professionals, alumni and careers advisors are involved in the task of delivering these contents and leading the assessment strategy. For this reason, this approach can be related to Smith *et al.*’s (2013) framework encompassing an array of ‘actors’. These can be linked to the active and diverse contributions made by different facilitators with a range of perspectives applied to CV and cover letter writing, job interview skills, and team working abilities among others essential elements needed in the development of employable students and graduates. This is a model of ‘co-teaching’ in which a number of professionals work together to assist students with both the academic learning and the professional career development required to enhance their skills applied to employment leading to success at job interviews and assessment centres. This framework also relates to Fernandez-Rio *et al.*’s (2017) approach to ‘cooperative learning intervention’ as the authors link the collaborative nature of similar co-created learning experiences with positive levels of student motivation to succeed. Further supporting this, Kumar (2007) also asserts that a student’s development of self-awareness benefits from a holistic input of feedback from different perspectives (tutors and peers alike) which can engender team effectiveness and interpersonal skills (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001).

A significant advantage of this approach is that a number of perspectives can be brought to bear on central questions regarding the specific topics that the module addresses, and the agreement over what an appropriate level of ‘mastery’ might look like (Graham and Ferrier, 2008). In this regard, Dixon and Daly (2017:53) note that educators should “maximise opportunities for social and collaborative learning and help learners to build the active networks

that can support the learner journey”. This further supports the suitability and benefits of using this co-creative and collaborative focus on crafting learning experiences to support student employability. Haddara and Skanes (2007) identify these synergies as positive elements of programmes of study that benefit the student, the education provider and employers as well (Rawlinson and Dewhurst, 2013; Weisz and Chapman, 2004; Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson, 2012). Finally, Soliset *et al.* (2012) highlight the importance of the relationship that develops between co-teachers throughout the planning and implementation phase of the learner experience (see Jolly *et al.*, 2008). This is emphasised by Weisz and Chapman (2004), who note that promoting both collegiality and collaboration in good co-teaching teams also enhances the student experience of a programme of study (see Pearce, 2005; Pancsofar and Petroff, 2016).

A modular case study

The ‘Employment Research and Planning’ programme of study encompasses 36 hours of in-class lectures and practical seminars delivered in the second year of a three-year degree. It aims to prepare travel and tourism students to objectively analyse and evaluate their own strengths, weaknesses and achievements (Dickinson and Griffiths, 2015) in order to produce an appropriate Curriculum Vitae and letters of application for the jobs of their choice. It also allows them to understand the different elements involved in assessment centres currently used in the travel and tourism sectors and how to present themselves adequately at these events (Paulhus *et al.*, 2013). The final stage of recruitment and selection schemes typically involve an individual interview which many students tend to find intimidating (McCarthy and Goffin, 2005). Therefore, the module provides them with a range of tools to perform with confidence at these interviews and effectively illustrate their suitability for the role they wish to access. Important details such as their body language, eye contact and personal grooming (Nguyen and Gatica-Perez, 2015) are discussed in-depth during lectures and seminar activities. In addition, eloquent approaches to structuring answers to questions commonly asked at job interviews are discussed and rehearsed – such as Whitacre’s (2007) STAR technique. Throughout these sessions, students are given feedback on their performance at role-play interviews. This feedback is teacher-led and students also benefit from self-assessments and peer-assessments in a three-way approach to reflecting on the skills, attributes and qualities needed to secure employment and means of demonstrating these to prospective employers (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001; Knight, 2001). Ruhanen (2006) also identifies these role-playing

exercises as very effective tools in skills development within a tourism education context (also supported by Arcodia and Dickson, 2009; Yan and Cheung, 2012). Students are additionally provided with essential knowledge of good practice when participating in group exercises that are commonly used to select staff for roles that entail team working abilities, which are vital in the travel and tourism context (Sucher and Cheung, 2015; Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001). The module also covers individual aptitude and psychometric tests drawn from industrial practice which familiarise students with these selection tools, providing them with confidence with the aim to strengthen their employability profile (Bharwani *et al.*, 2017).

As defined in the conceptual framework, it is clear that this module positively draws from Kumar's (2007) SOAR framework which is conducive of reflection on the students' personal Profiles (Self), Opportunities that they wish to access, Aspirations that underpin these pursuits and Results that stem from these journeys. Given the ample scope of employability-related subjects covered, it is clear that there is a need to inform the module from an equally wide ranging set of perspectives (Collet *et al.*, 2015). For this purpose, academics with relevant backgrounds and careers consultants with solid expertise in supporting travel and tourism students are invited to enrich the teaching schedule and deliver a cohesive and collaborative programme of study that students benefit from (Pearce, 2005; Pancsofar and Petroff, 2016). They deliver lectures and lead workshops on effective CV and cover letter writing, interview techniques, group assessments and different types of written tests. Additionally, a distinctive feature of this programme is the contribution made by industry professionals who share in detail their journeys towards employment. They draw from their own experiences as prospective industry workers to their current status as established professionals to expose students to real working environments, identified by Farbrother *et al.* (2009) as good practice in supporting student employability. Students are also given the opportunity to meet and network with other students who enrolled in the module previously and were successful in their search for employment as they worked towards their degrees. These contributions are orchestrated under the leadership of the module leader. As a result, rapport and engagement are enabled at different levels with the objective of crafting a stimulating experience that will root each students' motivation to pursue the roles of their choice from a well informed and confident perspective (Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson, 2012; Haddara and Skanes (2007)..

Assessment strategy

The assessment regime of this module responds to current industrial practice and provides students with first-hand exposure to what they can expect in the process of securing

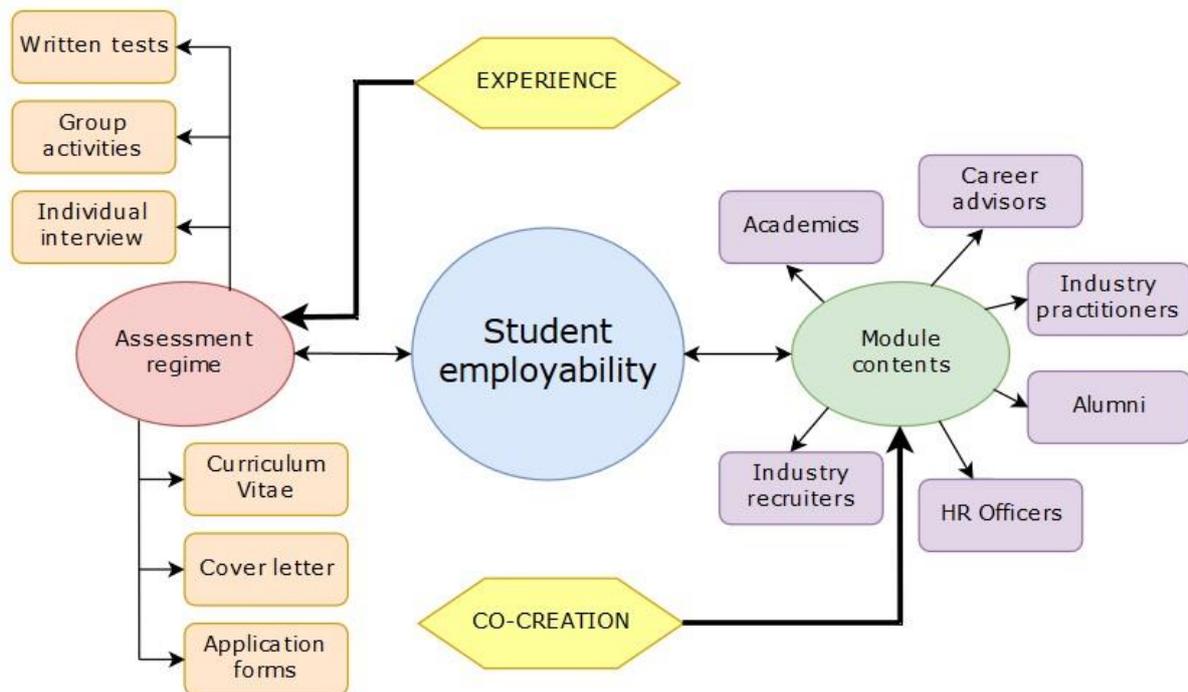
employment in travel and tourism. Described as ‘real world experiences’ by Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009), the authors highlight the critical importance of embedding these in the curriculum to enhance student employability prospects (see Helyer and Lee, 2014) as this learning is rooted in factual experience (El Hanandeh, 2016). To accomplish this, a full assessment centre that mirrors recruitment events currently used in the travel and tourism sectors is organized. This assessment regime requires students to prepare an application pack encompassing a CV, an application form and a cover letter for a relevant job of their choice. This written portfolio is developed during lectures and seminars and amounts to 50% of the assessment mix. The second summative element is also structured in three parts but is of an entirely practical and experiential nature as it encompasses: a group exercise, aptitude and psychometrics tests, and an individual job interview.

- The group exercise involves a team discussion of a contemporary topic relevant to the jobs that they wish to apply for. Throughout these 20-minute discussions in teams of six students per group, their communication skills are assessed along with their team working abilities, their focus on the topic and the depth of their contribution to the group task.
- The second element involves written tests that assess their basic checking skills, numerical reasoning and verbal comprehension.
- The third and final element is the individual job interview in support of the specific role each student has chosen. A two-member panel evaluates their industry knowledge, customer focus, team working skills, emotional resilience and approach to flexibility using questions commonly used in industrial scenarios. In addition, punctuality, initial handshake, greeting, body language and business dress are also part of the formal assessment criteria.

The assessment team involved in each stage of these assessment elements include careers consultants, human resources specialists, industry workers and academics with relevant backgrounds. Therefore, the marks awarded and the feedback provided to support them also stem from a collaborative and wide ranging approach inclusive of an array of different and well informed perspectives. Feedback on each element is produced as the assessment centre develops resulting in each student’s overall mark. Assessor comments to support the marks are noted in feedback forms that are forwarded to students who are then required to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as evidenced in the different stages of this assessment regime.

The collaborative framework used to deliver the module contents and implement the module's assessment regime using experiential learning approaches that draw from a variety of perspectives can be represented graphically as follows:

Figure 1. Graphical representation of the module's framework



As expressed by Figure 1 above, the module contents are delivered collaboratively and the different elements of the module's assessment regime are rooted in experience with the aim of enhancing the students' employability profile. To evaluate the impact of this collaborative approach to experiential learning and its effectiveness in developing employability skills, it is clear that a flexible methodological framework approach is needed. This relates to the wide ranging set of elements (from teachers to classmates to the nature of each role-play exercise) that may influence each student's experience of the module and its associated factors as discussed in the methodological framework discussed below.

Methodology: Social constructivism

The module was developed in consultation with industry partners and has been endorsed by academic assessors in light of student feedback captured throughout the process of designing

its contents and assessment regime. However, it is also clear that each student's experience and engagement with a course of study will be influenced by the individual's inner processes of assimilation and interpretation (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Thus, a methodological approach that considers and values these subjective processes is needed to address the research objective of this study and this requirement is matched by the notion of social constructivism (Silverman, 2017; Van Hover and Hicks, 2017). In this sense, Jennings (2001) highlights the benefits of adopting a social constructivist approach because of its focus on recognising the subjective nature of an individual's experiences. The author notes that 'there are multiple explanations or realities to explain a phenomenon rather than one causal relationship or one theory' (p. 38) (see Flick, 2014). This indicates that preconceptions are unhelpful to the production of new knowledge in the understanding of the intrinsic nature of a student's construction and interpretation of what a valuable learning experience is (Hollinshead, 2004; Paris, 2011). In addition, these foundational assumptions overlook the complex interactions between the different social factors that influence these processes of interpretation (Bryman, 2015). In the classroom context, the social actors can be identified as the module lecturer, students themselves and the range of careers consultants that provide employability advice in line with Smith *et al.*'s (2013) approach as addressed above. In view of this, social constructivism is adequate as a methodological approach to understand the value of this course of study and requires a flexible data collection tool to capture data that succeeds in providing detailed insights on the value of module.

Method: Semi-structured interviews

The module is assessed at the end of every academic term through quantitative research. But the aim of this research is to further understand the students' experience of the course of study in greater detail. This can be achieved by using a data collection method that would allow them to expand their views in length and make assertive points about their experience of the module contents and assessment regime (Galletta, 2013). Given the study's antifoundational approach and the richness of data that can be collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014), these were identified as the most suitable method due to their flexible nature (Rowley, 2012). The topic guide used to conduct the interviews enquired about the students' past and current employment history, the support received from the University in their quest for employment and the role that the module contents and assessment strategy played in these processes. It is important to note that this is not a quantitative study that focuses on the relative

frequency of success among students that secured employment. This is because the completion of a period of work is not a mandatory element of this programme given that many students choose not to pursue employment opportunities and therefore, this is left to each student's assessment of their own circumstances and aspirations. For example, the latest analysis of the cohort that enrolled in the module evidenced that 81% of students were in employment at the end of the year. However, not all of these jobs were related to travel and tourism. In view of this, the focus of the study is on the quality of the experience they gained throughout the module and its value in their journey towards employment in jobs related to their field of studies.

Sampling and data analysis

This project focused on final year students and recent graduates who were successful in gaining employment in a variety of roles in the travel and tourism industries after enrolling in the employability module. The roles that they secured range from flight attendants, communication officers, ground handling agents, and travel advisors among others. The companies they work for include British Airways, easyJet, Virgin Holidays, Thomas Cook and Heathrow Airport to name some examples. Given that participation in this research was voluntary and dependent on participants' willingness and availability, convenience sampling was chosen as the most adequate approach to focusing on a specific sample (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Most potential participants responded positively to the invitation to contribute leading to 16 interviews successfully conducted. It is important to note that invitations to participate were extended to students and graduates that succeeded in securing relevant jobs. Therefore, their views of the contribution made by the module may be subject to and construed as biased (Roulston and Shelton, 2015). This is a limitation of the study as acknowledged and discussed in further sections. The interviews conducted were recorded using an audio device and field notes were taken as each interview developed to highlight specific topics of interest, identified by Silverman (2017) as good practice in qualitative research. The overall interview material amounted to 5.26 hours, with the longest interview lasting 27.5 minutes and the shortest 7.4 minutes depending on the participant's willingness to develop their contributions to the study. At 16 interviews conducted, the average duration of the interview material was 19.7 minutes and once the data collection stage drew to a close, each interview was transcribed manually. This exercise allowed for greater rapport and familiarisation with this material and is useful to analyse data stemmed from interviews systematically and comprehensively (Veal, 2017; Christensen *et al.*, 2015; Denscombe, 2014). The coding process consisted in identifying

common patterns of thought among respondents (Babbie, 2015; Darlington and Scott, 2002) leading to the findings presented and discussed below.

Evidence analysis and discussion

The analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews using social constructivism as an anti-foundational approach to understand the student's perspectives on the value of the module evidenced three fundamental areas to consider. These are: 1. Development of interview and team working skills through experience; 2. Co-creation as a valuable element of the module; and 3. Competitive advantage gained at an appropriate time.

Interview skills and team working abilities rooted in experience

It was noted by most interviewees that there is solid value in providing them exposure to interview scenarios that are conducive of self-reflection leading to the development of essential employability skills: *"In a recent crew volunteer position I applied for, I remembered back to where I was here at University and what my weaknesses were highlighted as. So I ensured that those weaknesses were not played out in front of the selectors"*. Similarly, another student noted: *"It gives you a taster of what it is going to be like on the assessment day. I had two assessment days and both of them had those aspects. The two-to-one interview, that helps a lot in the confidence that you build"*. Further supporting this evidence, an interviewee also highlighted that this exercise allowed them to develop emotional resilience and agrees that it increases the necessary levels of self-awareness to succeed in creating a case for oneself as a candidate for a job: *"You need to be able to cope in an interview scenario (and) to be able to sell your best abilities. I think it was the first time I had been in a scenario like that and if I had not had that experience who knows what I would have been like in the actual day of the interview"*.

Some students also reflected on the added level of motivation to succeed at the mock interviews given that this is a formally assessed exercise, increasing levels of positive pressure to perform optimally: *"You have the added impetus of doing it properly because you were marked on it, you were graded on it. So yes, 100% it was (helpful) to be in those situations just prior to going into it to try to get a job, absolutely invaluable"*. In addition, interviewees also commented positively on the value of the experiential assessment regime in terms of the development of team working abilities that potential employers assess and highly value as essential in the travel

and tourism industries: “Activities like that get your mind focused on what you might expect. You need to learn how to be involved with other applicants, you need to know what the employers are looking for in a person”. In view of this evidence, it is clear that exposing students to these experiences builds their self-reliance through self-assessments leading to self-awareness of their behavioural tendencies when participating in recruitment and selection events: “The entire experience of the three stage mock assessment gave me confidence in how to behave in a real life situation”.

The holistic benefits of the experiences, highlighted earlier in the work of Gledhill and Smith (2013) are evident in light of this data. The significance of the affective should not be underestimated (Christie *et al.*, 2008). Confidence, and the wider emotional resilience, come from the student performing in assessments that challenge their ability to cope in real life business scenarios (Ekhaus *et al.*, 2017) and in so doing, developing the skills needed to succeed aided by this first-hand experience. Furthermore, the value of reflection on these experiences is enhanced by interactions with tutors, professionals and fellow students (Kumar, 2007). Nothing can replace the empowering sense which students gain from knowing that they have developed competencies which cut across the cognitive, social and affective dimensions; and this evidence fits well within these frameworks.

The adoption of the STAR technique to address interview scenarios (Whiteacre, 2007) clearly helped students gain confidence as they developed a solid framework to structure answers to interview questions. By rehearsing situations; tasks; actions and results; students are not only enabled to learn and develop their own responses to a commonly used structure. They are also compelled to reflect upon how they might present a case in this way in a selection process (Nguyen and Gatica-Perez, 2015; McCarthy and Goffin, 2005). In their reflections of the module, students could clearly note the impact which the exposure to these real-world scenarios had encouraged (Arcodia and Dickson, 2009); and they were positive about the value which this had brought in line with Anderson *et al.*'s (1995) assessment of the value of experience-based learning (Dacre Poole and Sewell, 2007). This is highlighted in the context of the development of team working abilities and positive interpersonal interactions that are fundamental in the travel and tourism industries (Sucher and Cheung, 2015; Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001). Similarly, as noted in Dickinson and Griffiths (2015), students had been able to reflect upon and evaluate their own strengths, weaknesses and achievements supported

by feedback stemmed from a variety of perspectives. This is highlighted by students who note the desire to address and strengthen areas of weakness before having to go through a real selection process (Strange and Gibson, 2017). The self-awareness developed by some students is clear when noting the benefit of the applied learning and an inability to imagine how this might have played out if these opportunities had not been made available beforehand (Farbrother *et al.* 2009; Ehiyazaran and Barraclough, 2009). The development of confidence in the approaches to use in interview scenarios also reflect the ideas of Anderson *et al.* (1995). In this sense, the notion that learning is a holistic process, and that the socio-emotional contexts in which learning occurs are significant. Rather than being a ‘distraction’, these contexts and their implications are themselves central to the true learning process (Armstrong, 2003; Ruhanen, 2006). Moreover, the authors’ idea that the process of experiential learning centrally involves the students’ own motivations, drives and energies is taken up by these respondents. These materialize as they endeavor to ‘*sell their best abilities*’ with a sense of confidence rooted in experience (King and Zhang, 2017) and feedback provided from a number of perspectives (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001).

The value of co-creation

The wide ranging set of perspectives that the programme benefits from in terms of contributions to the module contents and assessment strategy was noted by some interviewees as a useful element of their experience of the programme. This was noted in terms of the input provided by academics from a variety of backgrounds related to the travel and tourism industries who provided feedback on students’ performance at the assessment centre: “*In most interviews (...) you do not really get any feedback so to get that was fantastic (...) I would say the Department as a whole, all the lecturers and the feedback in terms of the interviews*”. It was also highlighted that the input provided by industry guests is a distinctive feature of the module as it exposes students to the standards currently used in recruitment and selection events as illustrated by those who are at present employed in these industries: “*That is where I got to interact with actual companies out there in the industry (...) otherwise you do not have an idea of what they are actually looking for but there you get to know what they want from you*”. Complementing these contributions, the role of the careers consultants that also play an important role in terms of content delivery, assessment and feedback was also identified as an important element of the module: “*Because of the course and the help from the careers and*

employability service I was receiving, I had the chance to think about my career prospects all the time and not leave it until the last minute at graduation”.

The importance of the notion by Moon (2004) who proposes that meaning is centrally tied up with the cultural context is evident in light of this data. The use of professionals from wide-ranging backgrounds offers students a broad exposure to a range of complementary but nonetheless different cultural contexts and standpoints from which to consider the working environment (Mejia *et al.*, 2017). This collaborative approach responds to Dixon and Daly’s (2017) evaluation of effective teaching teams, also supported by Haddara and Skanes (2007) and Fernandez-Rio *et al.* (2017). From academics to HR officers to travel and tourism professionals; these facilitators each bring their own paradigms, informed variously by their appreciation of each individual’s potential, the regulatory framework, the requirements of academic study and a practical, current understanding of the market and its needs. This exposes students to a rich tapestry of perspectives (Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson, 2012) which in turn helps them develop their own meanings which are therefore socially and culturally constructed (Anderson *et al.*, 1995).

Clearly then, the collegiality and collaboration which Jolly *et al.* (2008) suggest will be tangible in effective co-teaching teams is reflected in this case study, enabling the facilitators to work together in interpreting and making sense of these perspectives on employment and employability (Solis *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, without this help the reflection which can be so empowering to the student (AEE, 2007) would be impoverished (Weisz and Chapman, 2004). The development of awareness of these complementary perspectives is itself part of the process whereby a student develops the analytical capability of understanding and embracing different paradigms (Pearce, 2005; Pancsofar and Petroff, 2016) which they will meet, and respond to, in their pursuits for employment. The feedback stemmed from mock job interviews brought a clearer focus on the strengths and areas for development of each student as a potential employee (El Hanandeh, 2016). Consequently, this is enabled largely by the differing skillsets and viewpoints facilitated by the actors involved in this assessment. This evidence resonates the work of Kennedy (2010), who writes of ‘socially shared cognition’ (p. 43). The sense-making of the complex web of learning and feelings which this kind of work preparation brings is worked out through interactions with the range of professionals (the ‘Actors’ in Smith *et al.*, 2013) and with colleagues. The student continues to learn, to re-formulate ideas, to perform

and to gain in confidence in this social context (Kumar, 2007; Gledhill and Smith, 2013). As a result, the meanings which are attached to the learning process and experiences are not only shared but also interpreted in the light of these interactions.

Competitive advantage gained at adequate timing

As highlighted by the previous statement, some interviewees noted that it is important for students to reflect on their aspirations and employment prospects as they work towards completing their degree as opposed to starting this process at the end of it. This module is delivered in the second year of a three-year programme which is highlighted as good practice given that work experience and the implications of securing it are embedded into the degree: *“I think that is the perfect time to really start thinking about your future. It (had) the whole class thinking about what to do after University, what sort of employment we would want and what career paths might be an option”*. This reflective process was identified as useful not only because of the timing when it is conveyed at second year, but also because of the development of skills that will result in more employable graduates upon completion of their studies: *“The module guided me in a particular direction to go into a career field. I feel that the preparation that was done in the second year opens your eyes to what it is like to actually apply for a job where you need to develop your personal skills and strengths to ensure that you are successful”*.

Although it is evident that there is an increasing trend to embed work experience in programmes of study in travel and tourism, this is not always done (as evidenced by the fact that securing jobs is not a compulsory element of this programme). However, many students highlighted the competitive advantage that they gain from completing a degree alongside the encouragement to secure work experience in the field: *“My friends who went to other universities do not have an employability specific module. It is all academic and not really applied to work. (This module) is a good thing because what I am doing now is the stepping stone for when I finish my degree when I can apply for bigger roles”*. This statement highlights the importance of producing graduates that are able to demonstrate a wealth of knowledge in their field. But in addition, this knowledge is supplemented and enhanced by work experience that make them attractive candidates able to also demonstrate dedication to the completion of their degree along with the development of other skills and attributes highly valued by employers in the field: *“We are given a head start because at least when we finish we not only*

have our degree but we have experience in the industry under our belt as well. So I think it is essential”.

The implementation of the SOAR framework proposed by Kumar (2007) is validated by this data. This is evident in consistent references to student perceptions of their own profiles, the opportunities they pursued, the aspirations that underpinned these and future pursuits, and the results they obtained. This four dimensional framework is brought together in every element of a mock assessment centre that was later on used to validate and strengthen their job applications in ‘real’ industry based scenarios (Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009). This mirrors the combination of academic study and work-based learning which is key to the module overall. This approach engenders a learning process rooted in practice (Yan and Cheung, 2012) and reflection of the different opportunities they might wish to pursue after University along with the challenges they are likely to face in these journeys. Additionally, as noted by Knight (2001) and Fallows and Chandramohan (2001), there is indeed value in self-assessments, teacher-led and peer-assessments reflecting on the skills, attributes and qualities needed to secure employment. These learning processes result in a positive and confident approach to performing at competitive job assessment centres as noted by Kitterlin-Lynch *et al.* (2015) and Kumar (in Atlay, 2010). The ideas expressed by some respondents, that students elsewhere do not have the work experience opportunity, indicates a significant aspect of competitive advantage as this experience is a positive addition to their development as learners (Eurico *et al.*, 2015).

The work element of the student’s learning is quite unlike that experienced in the classroom, and can’t be fabricated in another way. Nothing will replace this opportunity in its impact on the development of the student holistically. A report by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) concluded that the best labour market outcomes were gained by those who had undertaken work based learning through the attainment of work experience (also supported by Helyer and Lee, 2014). In this sense, the starting point of accessing these opportunities is a confident approach to participating in assessment centres (Paulhus *et al.* 2015; Kumar in Atlay, 2010). This modules enables students to grasp recruitment schemes confidently given the different elements that are at the core of its contents and assessment strategy. This in turn results in offers of employment that lay the foundations of a variety of career paths in the travel and tourism industries (Robinson *et al.*, 2016), all of which originate in an effective performance at assessment centres and recruitment events (Kumar in HEA, 2015). From the first experience

of Higher Education, students are exposed to what Christie *et al.* (2008:1) call a ‘rollercoaster of confidence and emotions’. The significance of the affective can be underestimated in the quest to understand the learning process, and often seen as a distraction from its centrally cognitive nature. Whilst it remains the case that critical thinking skills are so important to employability (Kennedy, 2010) and can be gained in many contexts, there are a range of affective benefits (George, 2015) related to the confidence which comes from the achievement in the work environment (Reeve, 1989). It is not so much that the benefits in academic learning and the work experience complement and support one another; rather they are made up of the same basic ingredients.

Conclusions

The use of synergic approaches and collaboratively crafted experiences has proved to be an effective means of supporting student employability resulting in students that tackle highly competitive recruitment and selection schemes with confidence rooted in experience (Haddara, and Skanes, 2007). This study has used an antifoundational stance to understand the contribution made by this programme of study and its evidence concludes that this is a valuable element of the degree overall. It helps students understand the requirements, skills, capabilities, attitudes and behaviours that are needed to succeed in the task of applying for and securing work opportunities specifically applied to the travel and tourism industries (Kitterlin-Lynch *et al.*, 2015). This knowledge base is engrained through a practical approach to learning and assessment (Eckhaus *et al.*, 2017; Kennedy, 2010). But a distinctive addition that strengthens its value is the contribution made by a variety of perspectives (Solis *et al.*, 2012; Weisz and Chapman, 2004) that develop the students’ understanding of the different elements and stages involved in their employment pursuits. The use of game techniques (Eckhaus *et al.*’ 2017) in the context of this module succeed in developing students that are confident at different levels involved in recruitment and selection schemes. These journeys begin with the submission of a written portfolio that typically include a CV and a covering letter. If these succeed in profiling the candidates as suitable for a position, they are then invited to illustrate in person how their knowledge and skillset match the requirements of a role through job interviews, group assessments and written tests (Edenborough, 2005). The ability to understand and tackle each of these elements is developed by the module contents and assessment regime. As a result, students are equipped with the necessary tools to ensure that the professional aspirations that motivated them to enrol in a degree in tourism begin to materialise, one step at a time and from

a holistic perspective. The module contents and assessment strategy match Kumar's (2007) SOAR framework. This produces students that undertake self-assessments to understand their motivations to pursue their studies and the jobs they wish to access as they also identify the abilities and personality traits that exude in transferable skills that are relevant and valuable in the workplace. In turn, this process helps them research and understand employment opportunities that the job market offers which underpins their aspirations to access the work market and ultimately produce positive results when they submit effective application packs and perform positively and job interviews and assessment centres.

The value to students of the co-creation of their experience helps them on a number of levels. They benefit from the advice, guidance and past experience of their multi-disciplinary teaching team, and gain value from their individual and shared contributions as supported by the data. In addition, the students gain a practical insight into how teams work together in co-creating their experiences, and this experience has an enabling and enlivening impact on them. In this way, the 'affective' benefits of this kind of learning are evident (George, 2015) whilst providing exposure to functional teams and team working abilities which are indispensable in the travel and tourism sectors (Sucher and Cheung, 2015). As a result, experiencing the different personalities and approaches of the facilitators on the course has an empowering impact on students not only in preparing them technically to perform well in selection events, but also - and perhaps even more significantly- in enabling the student to have a confident and positive approach to working in teams. Indeed, the enhanced confidence plays a major role in delivering better performance. Therefore, it becomes clear that the affective benefits of this co-creative approach can be tied in with performance enhancement (Christie et al., 2008). In turn, the motivation to succeed is interlinked with improved confidence levels. These feed on each other, so that the confidence which comes from successfully applying themselves to the tasks itself develops motivation (Reeve, 1989), and the motivation then enhances performance and hence confidence. It then becomes evident that the module helps students through Kolb's (1984) transformative learning process as knowledge is derived from the transformation of a continuum of experiences. The experience is partly enriched by the multi-disciplinary team, and also by the students' working together in learning from one another (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001; Knight, 2001). This learning comes not only from direct involvement in their group activities, but also from the reflections and shared understandings which spring from them. When a student considers the interactions in which they are involved, reflects on

them, and is able to share this process with peers, then this transformation is enabled and energised.

In this sense, good experiential learning is in effect the journey towards the development of strong and critically reflective employment skills. The value of reflection (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, 2013) on the variety of elements to consider when preparing students to access the jobs market is evident in the module contents and assessment regime given the different levels and issues that both cover in detail. However and as noted, below, the module provides opportunities for the implementation of a stronger focus on reflection given the benefits that stem from reflective practice (AEE, 2017). In practical terms, the implications of this study indicate that experiential learning techniques continue to bring a wealth of benefits that can succeed in developing students and graduates that present themselves at assessment centres and recruitment events equipped with valuable lessons learned through experience. In addition, it is clear that this provision is enriched by a co-creative and collaborative approach to crafting and delivering these experiences by drawing from different perspectives that strengthen and inform the programme of study in its many elements. Preparation for professional and empowered employment comes from adopting appropriate environments in which experiential learning can flourish. Coker et al (2017) asserts that positive outcomes for graduating students are enhanced by both a deeper emersion (more time spent in experiential learning environments) (see Marton and Saljo, 1976), and a broader experience of it. This suggests that the learning would be enhanced by the inclusion of greater opportunities for this kind of work-related experiential learning at other phases of undergraduate study. This, coupled with the energising impact of critical reflection, can only serve to enrich each student's employability profile and this is achieved by this programme of study as supported by the data stemmed from students that succeeded in their journeys towards employment.

Limitations and recommendations

In spite of the contribution reported by the evidence analyses confirming the adequacy and value of using a collaborative experiential approach to develop a range of employability skills, it is important to note that this data stemmed from students that succeeded in securing jobs. This success may suggest that this sample of students may have been more engaged with the module contents and its assessment strategy leading them to perform well at recruitment and selection events. Their perceptions of the value of the module and its use of synergic

experiential techniques were entirely positive as evidenced in the fact that none of them highlighted scope for improvement. However and as discussed in previous sections, the rate of students that pursue and secure relevant jobs in travel and tourism tends to be lower than those who are unemployed by the end of the module or engaged in jobs unrelated to their course. This may be due to a number of reasons, starting with the fact that not all students wish to pursue relevant jobs as they complete their degrees and work experience is not a compulsory element of the programme. Additionally, students that did apply for jobs but were unsuccessful in these pursuits were not invited to inform this study. Hence, potential sample bias is clearly a limitation of this research. This is a potential limitation because an employed student could have dismissed the value of the module in spite of their success at securing a relevant job. But this was not the case with any of the respondents interviewed.

In view of this, further studies should focus on those students who did put themselves forward for relevant jobs but were not made offers of employment. This would result in a better understanding of the areas of the module that should be enhanced from their perspective to make a better contribution to their employment prospects. As noted above, this study has focused on stories of successful students in regards to their employment pursuits after enrolling in the module. But clearly, there is also potential to conduct research with the aim of unravelling the elements that lead to unsuccessful job applications and hence understand how to address them. There is also scope for conducting future research on the impact that the assessment centre process had on the student's performance at the job itself with the aim of understanding the relationship between recruitment and selection protocols with a worker's confidence levels on the job. This is because some students may have found the assessment experience intimidating and even if they did succeed in securing the jobs, their levels of confidence could be compromised. Finally, the reflective nature of effective experiential learning is not formally embedded in the assessment strategy. In this context, students are required to reflect on their experience of every stage of the mock assessment centre (Kumar, 2007) but these reflections are not formally submitted or assessed. A wealth of literature continues to reinforce the critical role that reflective practice plays in developing effective experiential learning opportunities that result in students with knowledge gained through experience (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Gledhill and Smith, 2013; Dacre Pool and Qualter, 2013; Anderson *et al.*, 1995). This indicates the need to conduct further research that focuses on different tools and approaches that engender effective reflection to cement the key findings of a learning experience. It also

highlights opportunities to conduct further studies on different approaches to reflective practice that influence the development of employability skills; both in written documents such as CVs and cover letters as well as in person through job interviews and group activities. Therefore, a stronger emphasis on reflective practice could also lead to a more insightful mapping of the different elements of the journey that paves the way to an employed student and graduate.

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