

2015-06-20

Students in Action: Engaging Students with Destination Stakeholders

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Recommended Citation

Ryan, T. (2015) Students in Action: Engaging students with destination stakeholders, *Students in Action Project* School of Hospitality Management and Tourism.

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Funder: Technological University Dublin

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Abstract

The *Students in Action Project* in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism was established in 2012 as a way of engaging students and working with stakeholders in a destination. The overall aim of the project was to immerse students in an active collaborative learning environment within the destination to identify ways in which tourism could be enhanced. In the 2014/2015 academic year the project involved over 300 students from a variety of programmes and modules working with local stakeholders in Wexford Town. To-date the project has been successful in its aims to develop staff, student and community engagement and has generated positive impacts in terms of lecturer and student collaborations and has also provided substantial outcomes for the destination. Going forward, while posing challenges in terms of funding, timetabling and logistical issues, the project provides extensive opportunities for further enhancement of student engagement and collaborative learning.

Key words: Student engagement, collaboration, learning, tourism destinations.

1. Introduction

The *Students in Action Project* was developed in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism as a means of engaging students in an active collaborative learning environment. Underpinned by the knowledge that student engagement is ‘... a key factor for learning and personal development’ (Salaber, 2014: 115) the development and application of the *Students in Action Project* involved students from across a number of programmes and modules working with the local community and businesses in Wexford during the 2014-2015 academic year. Cognisant that a greater emphasis on engagement with wider society has for some years now been a key objective of many higher education institutes and authorities, the overall aim of the project was to involve students in a multi-faceted project to the benefit of the students, the destination and all members of the community. Underpinned by Hunt’s (2011) recommendation for students’ engagement with the wider society to become more firmly embedded in the mission of higher education institutions, the project held at its core a key objective of providing a better educational experience by involving students in a project that ultimately developed staff, student and community engagement. The project explored many aspects of student engagement and applied these through collaborative learning with the stakeholders within the destination.

2. Outline of the project

The primary aim of the *Students in Action Project* was to counter what Eyer & Giles (1999) refer to as the isolation of learning from experience through providing students with a real world venue in which they could apply the skills they learned during their course (Owen & Hill, 2011, Bandy, 2014). In doing so, the project aimed to develop both discipline specific and transferable skills. It was a means of building on the work being done individually by a number of lecturers who had through their modules been engaging in field trips on an annual basis, through focusing the attention of a number of modules and programmes on one destination during one academic year. This provided the students with an opportunity to address many issues that the destination was experiencing from a number of different perspectives, and to build on their overall knowledge and skill base. The project was a collaborative approach between lecturers, students and stakeholders and its key objectives are outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Students in Action Project Objectives

| Students in Action Project 2014/2015 | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Objective One | To offer support to a destination over the course of an academic year in the form of focused project work and research. |
| Objective Two | To provide students with ‘real life’ experience to enhance their educational experience and skills |
| Objective Three | To provide a more integrated approach to module assessment across programmes |
| Objective Four | To provide an opportunity for lecturing staff to enhance their knowledge and aid the development of new teaching materials and techniques |

2.1 Project stages

The project involved two phases: Planning and Implementation & Evaluation and each involved a number of key stages as follows:

2.1.1 Phase One: Planning

- Stage 1: Selecting a destination, Wexford town (figure 1) was chosen as an appropriate destination for the 2014/2015 academic year based on the key criteria for selection which included:
 - The existence of a strong tourism community
 - Within broad proximity of Dublin and the DIT

- Evidence of wide ranging issues relating to tourism and hospitality, thus providing a rich foundation for student assignments and experiences.

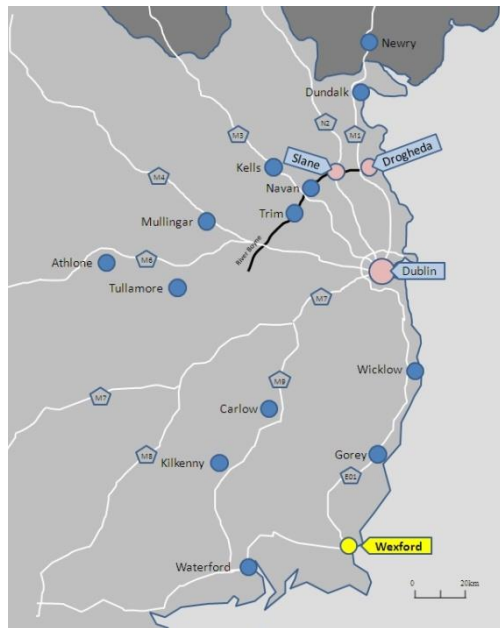


Figure 1: Wexford town, the destination chosen for the 2014/2015 project

- Stage 2: Initial contact was made to discuss the project and to get agreement for involvement from destination stakeholders. Subsequent to this initial consultation, meetings were undertaken with a variety of stakeholders in the destination this established key points of contact and clear lines of communication.
- Stage 3: Core team members sought expressions of interest from fellow lecturers.
- Stage 4: Module content, expected learning outcomes and relevancy were explored with a view to complementing all stakeholder requirements. This process was negotiated firstly with the core team outlining the project at a school meeting and subsequently engaging with colleagues on an individual basis as appropriate. The modules that were included in the project were decided on by the core team and the destination stakeholders, and are presented in Figure 2.

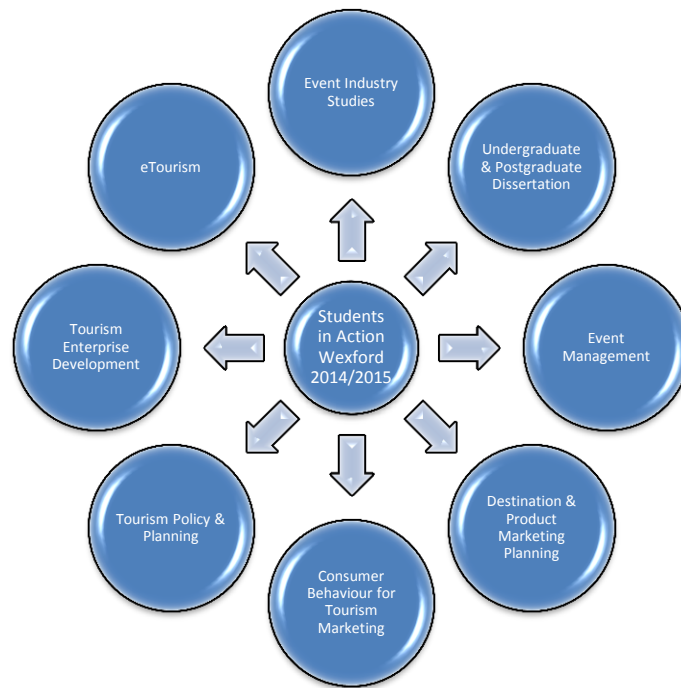


Figure 2: Modules involved in Wexford Students in Action Project 2014/2015

- Stage 5: Project refinement leading to a final proposal that was agreed by all involved and was ready for action on commencement of semester one.
- Stage 6: Organisation of site visits for each semester with a focus, programme and content pertinent to the different programme groups, the academic timetable and module needs.

2.1.2 Phase Two: Project implementation and evaluation

- Stage 1: Briefing students on the project and module requirements, and field trips. Emphasis was placed on explaining the opportunity for them to make a difference by applying their knowledge to a ‘real life’ situation. Useful theoretical and industry material links relevant to both the module content and destination were made available through various channels of communication both online and offline.
- Stage 2: Students undertook activities in the classroom to prepare them for site visits to Wexford.
- Stage 3: Site visits were planned and undertaken. Collaboration between the lecturers and the destination stakeholders was essential to their execution and success. Content varied according to requirements but generally involved the provision of short talks and presentations by tourism and hospitality stakeholders (figure 3) followed by visits to relevant sites and/or meetings with appropriate individuals or businesses (figure 4). Time was provided for specific module and assignment work to be undertaken and students were also provided with free time during which they were encouraged to wander and explore the destination, to get a ‘feel’ for the place and to engage with local people.



Figure 3: Student briefings by key stakeholders in Wexford



Figure 4: Students on a site visit in Wexford

- Stage 4: Reflection on and continued engagement with the destination through assignment and dissertation completion and submission.
- Stage 5: Co-ordination of students' assignments and key recommendations. Individual evaluation process with students on completion of each module.
- Stage 6: Dissemination of findings at a feedback event at the National Heritage Park, Wexford. Formal presentation of students' findings to Wexford stakeholders using a range of media; poster presentations, reports, oral presentation and videos (figures 5 and 6 show photographs taken at the feedback session with examples of the posters and presentation). The posters generated through student work will be on display in the National Heritage Park, Wexford.



Figure 5: Poster presentation



Figure 6: Students presenting their findings

The event was attended by a number of members of the County Wexford Age Equality Network who took part in the *Students in Action Project* (figure 7).



Figure 7: Members of the County Wexford Age Equality Network attending the feedback event in Wexford.

- Stage 7: Student Awards event to congratulate students who achieved excellence in their contribution to the project. The lecturer of each participating module nominated a group or individual based on their assignment work and the students were presented with a certificate in recognition of their achievement (figure 8).



Figure 8: Students in Action Award Ceremony

3. Community Participation

Community participation embracing the DIT Students Learning with Communities initiative formed the basis of assessment for the Destination and Product Marketing Planning module. Two student cohorts followed this module which involved collaboration with the County Wexford Age Equality Network and Wexford Local Development (WLD). In order to undertake the assignment which specified engagement with senior members of the community, a series of focus groups between the students and the member of the network were undertaken during a site visit to Wexford in February 2015. Input from the senior group influenced the output of this module and contributed towards intergenerational engagement as well as fulfilling the learning outcomes. The Age Equality Network/WLD and the selected students received a DIT SLWC award for their work in April, and resulted in very positive feedback from both students, Wexford Local Development and the Age Equality Network. A conference paper is currently being prepared building on this collaboration.



Figure 9:L to R: Dr. Noel O Connor, Director, Student Services, DIT, Sarah Lawler, B.Sc in Tourism Marketing, Sean Kinsella, County Wexford Age Equality Network, Rachel Lennon, B.Sc in Tourism Marketing

4. Evaluation and Conclusions

The feedback session was an opportunity to gather all stakeholders together in order to highlight the project outcomes, disseminate the findings, and bring the project to a conclusion. The event was held in the Heritage Park in Co. Wexford where refreshments were available to attendees who could examine the posters and attend a presentation of students' findings. This was followed by a question and answer session and members of the Wexford community also took the opportunity to thank the students for their work and to comment on the quality and extent of what had been achieved.

An individual evaluation process took place with the students on completion of each module through institutional quality assurance measures. In addition more extensive feedback has been sought from students in both verbal and written forms with a view to building on the experience and addressing challenges going forward. Findings from this research indicate that student engagement projects and research can help students to deepen their understanding of course content and enable them to integrate knowledge and theory with practice. Indeed, some DIT students reported that they '*felt more involved than [with] other assessments*', and liked the fact that '*it was based on real life situations and could actually have an effect on people's lives*' and that they '*... got to interact with the community and get their views and opinions*'

Other benefits for students include the development of transferable skills and the application of various types of skills, for example, critical thinking, reflective practice and problem solving. This is particularly pertinent for final year UG students and PG students, where the project or research may require higher level thinking. Alternatively, for first year UG students, community engagement projects and research can provide a good introduction to a topic or issue, motivate students and enhance their skills in working collaboratively. Finally, engagement projects provide enjoyable experiences for students beyond the classroom and an alternative assessment to a typical essay, report or group project.

Community benefits include collaborative learning with students, improved relationships with the college, the opportunity to educate future professionals about community needs, knowledge exchange and a useable end-product for the community, i.e. research reports, idea generation and problem solving. Community stakeholders have been found to value the enthusiasm, expertise and ideas of students and they explicitly identify the benefits they gain from the project outputs. Furthermore, community stakeholders can help throughout the project in a dynamic way, developing project and assessment ideas with academic staff to create a useable end-product for their community and gain increased access to college resources.

5. Future of the Project

The *Students in Action Project* has succeeded in its objectives of engaging students in an active collaborative learning environment and has generated positive impacts in terms of lecturer and student collaborations and has also provided substantial outcomes for the destination. A key challenge going forward for the project is finding suitable partners for collaboration. In order to be successful the project requires all stakeholders to be totally committed and it is imperative that partners are found in destinations and communities that want to work with students, and where there is scope for collaboration and engagement. The project also has a number of challenges in relation to matching course content with the project and in relation to funding and timetabling issues. Despite these

challenges, the *Students in Action* team have already begun plans for the 2015/2016 academic year and have made initial contact with key stakeholders at a destination, who are eager to be part of the project and discussions are currently taking place in relation to taking the project forward.

6. Recommendations to the DIT

Key recommendations include:

- Greater support in terms of funding for projects such as the *Students in Action* that encourage and develop greater student engagement.
- Increased support for developing opportunities for cross-collaboration both within and across colleges and schools.
- Greater recognition and support for colleagues involved in such projects, much of which encompasses a great deal of organisation and development beyond the scope of timetabled work.
- Embedding a particular emphasis on the building of relationships with stakeholders so that the achievements of the present can be maximised into the future and across projects
- Employ a more structured approach to orienting students to the varied project locations.

7. Dissemination activities

To-date the project has achieved the following:

- Dissemination of findings with key stakeholders at an event held in the Heritage Park in Co. Wexford.
- Dissemination of findings and award ceremony in DIT Cathal Brugha Street.
- Publications:
 - Craggs, R., Gorman, C. Griffin, K. Mottiar, Z. Quinn, B. & Ryan, T. (2015) '*Collaborative learning in a 'real-world' destination: Student perceptions of their learning outcomes*' Paper presented at the 2014 ATHE Conference: CO-CREATION IN TOURISM TEACHING & LEARNING. 4th-5th December 2014 at The Royal Society of Edinburgh .
 - Craggs, R., Gorman, C. Griffin, K. Mottiar, Z. Quinn, B. & Ryan, T. (2015 Forthcoming) '*Students in Action*', a destination-based learning approach to student engagement in Benckendorff, P. & Zehrer, A. (Eds.) *International Handbook of Teaching & Learning in Tourism*, Edward Elgar.
- Further planned outputs
 - A conference paper on the collaboration with the County Wexford Age Equality Network and Wexford Local Development (WLD) is currently being developed.

- Research is currently being undertaken with students who have been involved in the project. The findings of this research will be used as the basis of a paper for publication in an international peer reviewed journal in the area of Tourism Education.

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