

# A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN ACADEMIC RIGOUR AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE: SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING TRAVEL MANAGEMENT IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

The challenge for universities offering programs of study is to provide avenues for learning which are reflective of the needs of society, meet the needs of employers in Corporate Australia, and which are reflective of the technology now available. While innovation is an obvious key, any degree program must continue to provide suitable training and education for students so that they are “workplace ready” upon graduation.

## INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that there is the need to develop programs, which are based in academic rigour to uphold the university philosophies and at the same time produce graduates who possess the technical skills, which make them “workplace” ready.

Academic staff develop programs in Travel and Tourism, Leisure, Hospitality and Event Management and these programs are designed to equip students with the core competencies which will enable them to become the business management professionals of the future in their relevant fields: consumer oriented, entrepreneurial and with a strong business acumen. Travel programs also need to incorporate practical elements such as: Fares and Ticketing I and II, Galileo Computer Reservations System and an option of undertaking the Billing Settlement Plan (BSP). These are all industry recognised certificates, which students should be encouraged to undertake during their degree. The industry recognised certificates may be incorporated into various courses or offered during semester breaks in June/July, September and November.

Together with these practical components the students undertake to study core business subjects together with courses, which will offer a major in their relevant field. Many tertiary institutions offer students elective courses. If the students choose, they may graduate with two majors; for example a major in travel and tourism and a major in leisure or event management.

The debate continues, however regarding the benefits of academic rigour as opposed to technical application in certain business fields. In many Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and higher education institutions in Australia the method of assessment is moving towards competency based standards, which implies that the students can either perform the task required or they can not.

Pring (1984) noted that educators should “never lose sight of practical knowledge because it is valuable in itself and partly because practical knowledge is so often what theoretical knowledge is theorised about”. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to

review the challenges now facing universities to prepare graduates who are “workplace ready” for the travel industry.

### **EDUCATION VERSUS INDUSTRY**

There is ongoing debate regarding academia and industry with many writers’ (Tasker & Packman 1993; O’Brien & Deans 1995) criticising areas of business education as being either too theoretical or too compartmentalised due to the manner in which the universities or institutions are structured. More particularly, they note that many higher education institutions lack a holistic approach to problem solving and that students do not have an overall focus of the business world.

There are those in academia who suggest it is not the role of the higher institutions to focus on what industry specifies and that by doing so they are limiting the value of the academic experience (Barnett, 1990).

One should not lose sight of the fact however that education and industry have two very different agendas with industry promoting enterprise and entrepreneurialship whilst academia promotes the values of academic rigour, academic freedom and its intrinsic importance to the contribution towards society’s development (Tasker & Packman, 1993).

### **STUDENT MOTIVATION**

What of the student? What is it that they want from a sound education? O’Brien and Deans conducted a study in 1996 and they discovered that university students were very clear in their requirements of a university education and on the specific type of employment they were seeking in their relevant fields. Hence there has been a necessity for universities and other tertiary institutions to meet the needs of the students in this regard. It is apparent that students see universities as providing a pathway or process needed to be undertaken to gain future employment.

Universities have become heavily involved in the information evenings/days for prospective students and have clearly noted that the tertiary education sectors have embraced the importance of such events. It is also noted that students are perspective clients who, for the most part, are very discerning on where they study and what they study and particularly, the method of delivery of the courses. Many in the tertiary education sector are now emphasising the employment rates of their graduates to enhance the 'saleability' of their degrees or courses to their prospective students (Long & Tonks 1995; O’Brien & Deans 1996; MacFarlane 1993). These findings have, therefore necessitated a review of the curriculum content and in many instances the method by which the information is imparted.

### **ACADEMIC INITIATIVES**

The changes noted above have brought about a commensurate shift within the halls of academia. The circle has nearly turned completely from an emphasis on practical application to academic rigour and now back to the inclusion of practical application again. At The University of Queensland Ipswich Campus (UQI) this has been very evident in the curriculum of courses offered. A recent recommendation by an international review panel suggested continuing to include practical components where possible in the School of Tourism and Leisure degree courses.

Tertiary institutions today also recognise that many students need to work whilst they are studying or have family commitments and cannot always attend lectures when scheduled. To assist students some campuses offer all courses by flexible delivery mode. However, research indicates that most students prefer to attend courses wherever possible and that they tend to use the 'flexible' mode rarely or under exceptional circumstances. It has also been reported that students who attend the courses, on average, obtain a better grade than those who don't. Hence, it should be suggested to students that they have a choice of attending lectures in person or not, but there are advantages if they do.

Academics must continuously keep in touch with their relevant industry and keeping up-to-date with industry trends and innovations and incorporating these in the yearly course updates of the flexible delivery learning guides and lectures.

At the same time, it is imperative that students endeavour to find 'work experience' in the relevant field in which they intend to work. Without this experience students do not have a true grasp of the industry requirement or expectations and they may discover that the degree they have chosen is not what they really thought it would be. Hence 'work experience' is an invaluable developmental tool. This may not necessarily be a structured 'work placement' process but up to the individual student to actively participate in the process of 'looking for work' which is an invaluable experience for them.

### **INDUSTRY REQUIREMENTS**

Industry also stressed the need for graduates to be able to work as a team, to be flexible, innovative, think strategically, communicate well, identify main tasks and work toward a solution or resolution and to be able to work to a deadline. These industry concerns are addressed in a lecture environment and also in group work and assessment. Thus industry requirement is in some conflict with educationalists such as Bailey (1990) who suggested that education systems are based on individual work and that collaboration or working as a team should be frowned upon.

Industry also emphasises the need for graduates with a business degree to have some experience specifically related to the management field. Porter & McKibben (1988) noted that many graduates find themselves leaving their tertiary education with little or no experience in the management or business fields. Whilst the industry may require or indicate their desire for graduates to have these qualities, it is often difficult for students to gain the desired work experience when those who are espousing the desired graduate outcomes, do not assist with the process by taking on students so that they are able to gain this valued experience. In many 'sandstone' universities the notion of 'work experience' is not often condoned because of financial constraints or resistance to change (Connor 1991) and so innovative teaching methods are adopted to overcome these obstacles so that the students receive an education based in academic rigour together with practical applications.

Universities need to forge strong links with industry in their various related fields to keep up-to-date and to have the industry involved. Adjunct Professors are well regarded in their fields and are willing to guide the university on the way to producing 'work place ready' students of the future. However, it is often the 'person on the ground' who makes the employment and work experience decisions not the Directors

or Chief Executive Officer and it is then necessary to overcome this obstacle at ground roots level.

### **INTERNATIONALISATION**

Tertiary institutions have recognised that business is becoming more and more global and as such our graduates must be ready to take up positions anywhere in the world. A survey was conducted in 1998 of leading international businesses and it showed that over 50% of company revenue is derived from international markets and that on average, they operate over 50 countries (“Masters of Globalization,” 1998).

Whilst the recent terrorist attack in the United States of America has affected the leisure and tourism related industries worldwide they will no doubt bounce back in due course. Perhaps though, with amendments or variations to the structure and style of the travel industry as is occurring within the airline industry currently. Prior to these attacks the growth in the globalisation of business could be attributed to several factors; the immense development in international communication and transportation; the relaxing of many trade and investment policies and the continued privatisation which has allowed many companies to compete globally. Students must be prepared to seek to develop their career in this environment and so we as educators must keep current and up-to-date with worldwide business practice. These changes, as one might expect, are a point of some stress to many academics in higher education as they are being forced to rethink old ways of knowing, teaching and learning, as well as being required to update their base level of technological expertise.

### **CONCLUSION**

So, the question is: How do we as educators keep the students we have, and at the same time, win over perspective new students who are seeking education and training?

Students who have a choice of almost any program from the World Wide Web. Clearly we must deliver first class academic degrees, which incorporate practical application where applicable or feasible, and that courses should be relevant to industry where appropriate to enable the students to be ‘workplace ready’ on graduation. How this is achieved will vary from course to course, lecturer to lecturer and institution to institution. What is clear, however, is that we must deliver a world class product to our clients, the students, so as to meet the global demands of business.

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