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FULFORD, H. and CARGILL, E. 2017. Five go to a country house: reflections on developing a residential programme for undergraduate management students. Presented at the 6th Chartered Association of Business Schools conference on learning teaching and student experience (CABS LTSE 2017), 25-26 April 2017, Bristol, UK.

**Five go to a country house:
reflections on developing a residential programme for undergraduate management students**

Abstract

For the academic year 2015-16, a new route was devised for undergraduate students in year three of their four-year Management degree. This route, denoted "Connect to Business", was designed to allow students to participate in short work placements in SMEs or Third Sector organisations for two-three days per week. These placements were undertaken alongside a focused programme of personal and professional development, and taught project modules in enterprise and business consultancy. In addition, at the start of the Connect to Business year, the students were given the opportunity to take part in a three-day residential module devoted to a range of enterprise and employability topics. The design of this residential drew on lessons learned from our leadership of residential courses for students on summer placements in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (the ScotGrad Placement Programme) and represented part of our commitment to the embedding of learning from that programme into our own curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to provide a reflective account of the Connect to Business residential programme viewed from both the student and academic perspectives. We include thoughts on programme structure and coverage, benefits realised, and challenges encountered. The points highlighted in this brief paper will be discussed more fully during the conference presentation, and the lessons learned will be discussed. The presentation will include discussion of how the changing learning and employment environment opens up opportunities to offer students new ways of learning and preparing for the world of work.

Keywords

Enterprise; placement; career capital; employability; assessment centre; idea generation; problem solving; project planning; reflective practice

The adventure begins

On a sunny autumn afternoon, the Five clambered into the front of the bus, carefully clutching their checklists, risk assessments and booking confirmations. Stowed away carefully in the boot of the bus were copious flipcharts, coloured pens, blutac, worksheets, handouts and oodles of post-it notes. Behind them in the bus sat a group of 30 undergraduate management students, nervously whispering about what lay ahead of them and wondering whether they had packed enough snacks to keep them going. The bus steered out of campus and headed off out of the city. The Five exchanged anxious glances as they left behind them their jobs in the Placement Office, Careers Service, and academic groups in the Business School. Somehow they each knew an adventure was about to begin. After an hour or so on the road, the bus slowly nudged into a narrow driveway, passing a field of donkeys, and eventually drawing to a halt outside the main entrance to an imposing country house.

Time for action

Once inside and the cries of "Gosh!", "golly" and "wow" had subsided, the Five made sure the students were supplied with tea and plenty of cakes. Then it was time for action! The learning programme began with introductions, CV reviews, and activities to build a sense of community. There were team projects and presentations to develop confidence and team working skills. Professional networks were discussed, network maps produced, and online network profiles refined. Individual pitches helped students promote themselves in preparation for job interviews. A team project to generate and evaluate a business idea helped the students work on their creativity and problem-

solving skills. The Five really wanted to help the students grow in confidence and become a focused learning community to set the scene for the remainder of the academic year. A mock assessment centre was used to remind the students of what graduates employers are looking for and how they approach recruitment.

The country house was not simply a lovely place to stay, but also gave the Five great opportunity for designing new activities for the students. A team-building treasure hunt in the house and grounds helped students focus on their problem-solving skills. A stimulating and thought-provoking presentation by the manager of the house set the scene for a marketing challenge. Meal times grew livelier as the programme moved on apace and the students got to know one another and felt more at ease discussing their work and their future career plans with the Five.

Pausing to reflect

On the final evening, after some hilarious student pitches of their business ideas to some rather fierce (but penniless) dragons, it was time to relax at last for a brief while. Some students dashed off in search of the donkeys while others embarked on a mammoth jenga tower-building challenge. Some simply returned like long lost friends to their smartphones to catch up on social media. The Five flopped down on sofas by the fireplace and their thoughts turned to the events of the past two days. As they sipped on their glasses of (ginger?) beer they realised the programme had enabled the students to build important bridges with staff from the Placement Office and Careers Services. It had given them time to reflect on their placements and the contributions they were making to the businesses they were working with. They had developed skills which they could readily put into action in their placements, and would be able to include on their CVs as they prepared for graduate employment. They had been given the space to be creative and refine their presentation skills in a relaxed environment. The Five could see how the students had grown in confidence and in their understanding of enterprise and employability. At times it had been tough for some, but there had been great chances for one-to-one discussions with students to encourage and support them.

After more tea and cake on the last afternoon, the programme closed with some student reflections. The Five asked the students to complete a brief reflective postcard, identifying one aspect of the programme that had been important for them [1], [2]. Their cards included these comments:

"I now know where my strengths and weaknesses are"

"My presentation skills were developed ... I have learned to be more confident, and know I need to work on the ... flow and timing of my pitches"

"... given me a better insight in how to manage my role in groupwork"

"It was good learning about what employers are expecting from us"

"So much group work in a short time helped me improve my teamwork skills"

"Building confidence in front of others is a significant breakthrough for me"

"It got us active. It was interactive. It was competitive. It was fun"

After a group photo in front of the house, the Five climbed into the bus. Behind them, the students chatted and laughed. They were heading back to campus, tired but happy.

References

1. Fulford, H. and Bailey, M. (2014). Journals and jottings on entrepreneurial journeys. In Proceedings of the 9th European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Belfast: University of Ulster. Edited by Brendan Galbraith.
2. Fulford, H. and Bailey, M. (2015). Answers on a postcard please: a guided approach to reflective writing, In Proceedings of Lots to Learn: sharing learning experiences, RGU Learning and Teaching Conference, Aberdeen, 2015.