

The introduction of a learning innovation to enhance the employability of event management students: an action research study.

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Abstract

Curriculum innovation in higher education is often directed at efficiency; however, this paper reports a small change in the curriculum which was designed to enhance student employability. Central to the learning and assessment of an undergraduate Events Management unit is that the students, in groups, organise a real event. In the academic year 2008-09, 'clients' were sought for each group, for whom the students could act as consultants in the organisation of an event. Communication skills in relation to consultancy were a particular emphasis of the innovation, which was evaluated using an action research methodology. Data, collected during the year, suggested that just over half of the cohort believed the approach was helping them to obtain a 40 week industrial placement for the following year. Furthermore, about three-quarters of the students felt that it would be beneficial in employment, first, during their placement (30% indicated it would be very useful) and secondly, after graduation. Upon completion of the events, the student group leaders and the clients were each asked to rate the other party and this showed that the clients also had a very favourable opinion of the students. Recommendations for minor modifications to the format were then made for the next academic year.

Keywords: employability; curriculum innovation; action research; consultancy; communication skills

Introduction

Higher Education has seen a commodification of the curricula as successive governments have aimed to make the sector more efficient, particularly in terms of financial investment. A key and explicit emphasis in educational provision has become the concept of student employability.

The influential Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) identified a set of key skills namely, communication, numeracy, IT and learning how to learn at a higher level and recommended that the provision of these skills should become a central aim for higher education. Subsequently, literacy, problem-solving skills, team-working skills and employability skills have also been recommended.

However, Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2006), in a study of the effects of employability skills initiatives in higher education on graduate labour market outcomes, concluded that there was no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills had a significant independent effect on graduate employment. However, they did show that structured work experience had first,

positive effects on graduate employment within six months of graduation and, secondly, the ability to secure employment in graduate-level jobs. This suggests that it is the application of knowledge in a real-life setting that is of value.

'The strongly positive effects of student work experience on labour market outcomes serve as a reminder that many relevant employability skills are probably best learned in workplaces rather than in classroom settings' (Mason *et al.* 2006, p.25).

Each year, second-year students studying for a BA Events Management or BA Leisure Marketing degree in the School of Services Management at Bournemouth University undertake the compulsory unit of Events Management. Central to the learning and assessment of this unit is that the students, in groups, organise a real event. In the academic year 2008-09, a seemingly small modification was made to this curriculum, by the introduction of a 'client' for each group. The aim of this innovation was to first and foremost enhance students' employability but secondly, additional gains would be made in line with Bournemouth University's strategic policy in relation to the local community. Whilst there were definite gains in respect of the latter, this paper evaluates the innovation in respect of the experiences and outcomes of the students only. The aim of this paper is therefore to describe the introduction of clients to the Events Management unit and to evaluate the pedagogic benefits and impacts of the innovation.

The paper begins with a limited review of the context in which the innovation takes place and in particular, the changes that occurred during the period of the project. The following sections consider the methodology of the study, the findings and then recommendations for the future. The authors are the two tutors for the student cohorts and as Hounsell notes:

'...no one is better placed than the teacher most directly concerned to make sense of feedback and to weigh its significance against a knowledge of the subject matter in question, the teaching aims and objectives, and the interests, aspirations and capabilities of the students who provided the feedback' (Hounsell, 2003, p. 208).

Reflective practice needs to be systematic and one way in which it can be supported is through 'action research' (Biggs & Tang, 2007) and therefore that approach was adopted for the project.

Action research

Action research has become a well-developed form of professional learning in education (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Acting in the mode of 'participative action researcher' (Kember & McKay, 1996) demands that the study is undertaken systematically and rigorously and so the action-reflection cycle of McNiff and Whitehead (2006) (see Figure 1) was adopted.

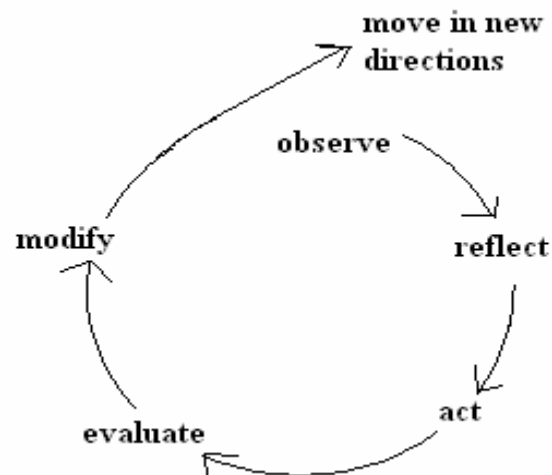


Figure 1: An action-reflection cycle
 Source: McNiff and Whitehead, 2006, p. 9

It was observed during the organisation of the previous year's student events that the students were deliberately selecting an event format for which they thought they could achieve a high grade (often because they had experience of organising a similar type event.) This of course limited the learning experience and so following discussions, it was suggested by the Assistant Dean, Retail and Events, that clients be introduced for the events. This would offer a more realistic scenario, similar to that which students would encounter during their industrial placements in the following year and in employment upon graduation. The tutors welcomed this suggestion but then needed to consider how the teaching of the unit should reflect the introduction of clients. The action research question therefore became:

How can the development of successful student client relationships in the Events Management unit be supported?

Context of the research

In 2008-09, the Events Management unit was taught to 97 BA Events Management (BAEM) students and 47 BA Leisure Marketing (BALM) students. Each degree consists of two years of taught study, followed by a one-year industry placement and then a final year of taught study. The BAEM is a relatively new programme with its first cohort graduating in 2009, with each year substantially over-subscribed. The students' abilities reflect those of the University as a whole, with about 5% having additional learning needs.

The aim of the unit is to enable the students to experience the practical implementation of the different methods and theories relevant to event management. Jarvis (2006) distinguishes between a context '*that approximates the practice world... a virtual world, relatively free of pressures, distractions, and the risks of the real one to which, nevertheless, it refers*' [quoting Schön, 1987] and '*practice-based learning...in the real-world, under slightly sheltered conditions*' (Jarvis, 2006, p. 147). It is the latter that this project sought to emulate. This was achieved through groups of students undertaking the organisation of live events. The students were randomly assigned to sub-groups within their seminar groups, with each sub-group

organising a separate event. The BAEM students were divided into 16 groups and the BALM into 8, totalling 24 events to be supervised. Assessment of the unit consisted of three pieces of course work; the first two, a business plan and the live event, being group work and the third, an individual evaluation. In view of past experience involving the cancellation of an event, the three assignments are designed in such a way as to be assessed independently.

This form of 'live' case study is becoming common on an increasing number of business and management programmes (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2001). The responsibility of the tutors is to guarantee that learning takes place irrespective of the success of the project. However, as Beaty notes '*The role of the university in the relationship with the client organization varies considerably*' (Beaty, 2003, p. 141). For this unit, the tutors believed that maximum learning would take place where there was the minimum interaction in the decisions taken between the client and the students. Therefore although the students were guided in organising the event, with the exception of one key area, the students were free to determine the success (or it must be recognised), the failure of the event. Intervention would only occur if an event would place an individual or organisation (including the client and University) at risk, whether in terms of health and safety, economic liability or reputation etc. Events have been successfully undertaken in previous years and their value is recognised: '*Again from an industry external examiners point of view, it is encouraging to see that [they] have applied theory and learnt skills in real event management situation[s]*' (BAEM External examiner' report 2007-08).

The project /innovation

Kelly suggests that change '*can be smoother, quicker and more effective, if it is not left to chance but implemented according to carefully thought-out strategies*' (Kelly, 2004, p. 1). In designing this new approach to the unit, there were therefore two key aspects to undertake, first finding the clients and secondly whilst still meeting the existing intended learning outcomes, incorporating the client into the teaching in order to achieve the desired additional outcomes (Enzenbacher, 2005; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

The clients were located in two main ways. The first group of clients were internal to the University, including for example, the Careers Department and the Student Union. The second group were external organisations and charities known to the unit tutor or other members of staff in the School.

Beaty notes that responsibility in a work-based learning project is divided between the University, client and student group, therefore '*the clarity of roles and responsibilities is a key to the successful outcome*' (Beaty, 2003, p. 141). An important issue is that of finance and so it had to be made clear from the outset to both the students and the clients that the University was unable to provide any financial contribution to the events. The other administrative arrangements, such as the period during which the events could take place, were also determined to fit with the academic and other requirements of the unit and the University. These were sent to all the potential clients and accompanied by a form requesting their contact details and other information. Return of the completed form was taken as agreement by the client to participate in the process. The unit handbook included similar information and set out for the students, the academic requirements of the unit and the limitations and obligations of organising an event.

Biggs and Tang (2007) argue that '*Good teaching supports those activities that lead to the attainment of the intended learning outcomes*' (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 29). The intended

learning outcomes (ILOs) and the summative assessment for the unit were already established, however, ILOs for each teaching session and formative assessment could be introduced. In designing outcomes Biggs and Tang suggest that the first consideration is to decide on the kind of knowledge to be involved. For the particular outcomes sought functioning knowledge rather than declarative knowledge would predominate. The teaching/learning activities they advocate for functioning knowledge are “‘*apply*’, ‘*create*’, ‘*solve problems*’ and for ‘*lifelong learning*’” (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 135). Therefore a teaching activity was sought that could enable the students to apply consultancy skills, foster creativity and enhance their employability skills.

In describing the consultancy process Hind and Moss (2005) identify several stages, of which the first is pitching for the account. To try and create a realistic scenario, and to mimic real life, the pitching stage of the process involved competition (not against other consultants as in a commercial setting, but other groups of students) and required each group to make a brief presentation about their event proposal. The intended learning outcomes were that students apply their knowledge of event design to create and describe the experiential aspects of an event in their bid.

In order to engage and motivate students who would normally adopt a ‘surface’ approach to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Entwistle, 2005), it was important that the students take ‘ownership’ of the event, rather than having an event imposed upon them. As Biggs and Tang note, motivation for learning arises when something has value to the student and they expect success from their endeavours. To provide some element of choice, brief information was presented about each client, based on the contents of the form submitted by the client. This was formatted into A4 posters which were temporarily fixed to the wall during the first seminar of the year. The students then walked around viewing the posters to decide which client they would like to ‘bid’ for.

Not only did the students need to research their clients, their needs and expectations etc. but also propose suitable events. This enabled them to demonstrate creativity and interest in the client which would be difficult to undertake and assess in a written formative assessment. Whilst there is insufficient space to discuss group work here, a further objective of the exercise was for the students to ‘gel’ into an effective group.

The following seminar was styled a ‘Dragons’ Den’ based on the BBC programme of the same name. In order to create elements of a ‘Theory Y’ climate (McGregor, 1960) the students were told that they could use a PowerPoint presentation or bring any ‘props’ as they wished – the design of their bid was up to them. At the end of each presentation, the ‘Dragons’, that is the tutors, asked questions and made comments in the style of the programme. Half of the groups were successful in their bid; the others were allocated a group requiring a similar type event, following discussions between the tutors. Each tutor then gave formative feedback aligned with the intended learning outcomes in the following week’s seminar, when the allocations were announced.

The first part of the following lecture consisted of a presentation from representatives of the Student Union who help support the organisation of the students’ events. The opportunity was taken in the second part of the lecture to discuss organisational culture and to introduce the idea of the different ways in which clients could behave, both during their event and later when students are out in industry. A formal and then informal definition of organisational culture was given: *‘The collection of traditions, values, policies, beliefs, and attitudes that*

constitute a pervasive context for everything we do and think in an organisation' (McLean & Marshall, as cited in Mullins, 2008, p. 464) and then *'how things are done around here'* (Mullins, 2008, p. 464).

Understanding that organisations have different cultures is essential as Hind and Moss (2005) suggest to students that *'Employability skills (ES) are a set of social behaviours and skills that you can learn to help you interact and work with other people in a variety of different situations'* (Hind & Moss, 2005, p. 1). The final benefit, that it was hoped would be achieved by this approach, is an additional key requirement of industry identified by the Dearing Report - that of communication skills and for that, students need to learn not only the 'language' or discourse of the academy, but also of their intended industry. Communicating with clients provided opportunities to do so in a real context rather than then that of the classroom. The concept of 'the client' was subsequently embedded in all future teaching activities, in both lectures and seminars.

Whilst appreciating the strengths of the introduction, the weaknesses of the approach also needed to be considered. The main concern was the time that would be committed in the early seminars which would have to be compensated for by withdrawing some of the other teaching sessions. Exercises that had previously been undertaken in the classroom setting in preparation for the writing of the business plan (summative assignment) e.g., creating Gantt charts, would have to be undertaken by the students in their own time. However, on balance, it was believed that many of the skills learnt through the 'Dragons' Den' exercise could not be assessed in the business plan and that the formative assessment exercise was therefore the more effective way to proceed.

To summarise, the key rationale for introducing clients to the student groups was *not* cost efficiencies (Maher, 2004), but to improve learning outcomes by:

- Providing students with a unique opportunity to work with a client
- a chance to gain insights into different types of organisations
- an opportunity to develop new communication skills
- a need to be open to new ideas/clients requirements and
- to be in situations requiring negotiation and flexibility.

It would therefore provide a learning environment other than a traditional classroom, which would support intellectual development and cognitive functioning (Kelly, 2004).

However, *'Events do not take place in a vacuum'* (Allen, O'Toole, Harris & McDonnell, 2008, p. 63) and therefore nor could this innovation. Just before the start of the academic year, the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the takeover of HBOS in September 2008 (Telegraph, 2009) showed that the economic crisis was becoming deeper and that this would impact on the student's events. Accordingly, the students were directed not to consider 'black tie' events as in previous years but to think about lower cost occasions. These would offer exactly the same learning opportunities, admittedly without the 'glamour' but critically, also without the financial risk.

This warning was proven accurate when in January, the Event journal suggested that there would be a shortfall in funding in the charitable sector of £2.3b, in 2009 (Francisco, 2008) and industry analysts suggested that charitable organisations would have to concentrate on small-scale local events rather than major corporate events. Unfortunately, despite the initial restrictions the student events programme was still affected and four events had to be

cancelled as a direct result of the economic downturn. From the students' perspective, the most important aspect was to facilitate continued learning and assessment and this was undertaken through the rapid identification of replacement clients and intensive support by the tutors. For the tutors, there was the additional concern that the partnerships developed with the individuals in the organisations concerned should not be damaged for either themselves or colleagues who had also formed good working relationships with them. By mutually recognising that cancellation of the event was not attributable to the students the event tutors ensured that future relationships were not put at risk.

Curriculum evaluation is defined by Kelly as the process in which it is sought '*to gauge the value and effectiveness of any particular piece of educational activity*' (Kelly, 2004, p. 137). Whilst evaluation can be a necessary part of accountability, it can also be beneficial to good professional practise (Hounsell, 2003). Macfarlane and Ottewill suggest that evaluation '*should be at the heart of a learning, teaching and assessment strategy*' (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2001b, p. 71). The next section therefore discusses whether the curriculum of the Events Management unit benefited by the introduction of clients.

Methodology

The evaluation of the innovation was undertaken in two stages. The first stage gauged the students' perceptions of their client whilst they were midway through organising their event. This was undertaken through a brief questionnaire posted on a PowerPoint slide at the beginning of the first lecture of the second term. The students were reminded of the need to write reflectively for their final individual assignment and asked to reflect then on their group's relationship with their client. Answers were written on a card (a variation on the 'post-it' technique) and anonymity was guaranteed. The qualitative data was analysed thematically (Seale, 2004) and then coded and entered with the quantitative data for analysis using SPSS (version 15) software.

The second stage of the research was undertaken upon completion of the events. A key issue in designing pedagogic research is when to capture the data – a dimension that Hounsell, (2003) suggests is often overlooked. If it is left to the end of a unit or course, experiences can be difficult to remember with accuracy. Therefore within a few days of the event each team leader and client was sent a brief questionnaire by email. Each was asked to rate the other party on a small number of aspects on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent. They were also asked to look forward to the next academic year and whether they recommended their client (the students) or whether they wanted to participate again (the clients). The data from the completed questionnaires was again entered into SPSS for analysis. In the student survey, 20 out of 24 surveys were returned and clients completed 15 of the 24 surveys. This gave response rates of 83% and 63% respectively.

Findings

In the first question of the initial stage undertaken part way through the course, students were asked to describe their relationship with their client, and over half of the students gave a positive comment (see Figure 2 below) and a further quarter a mixed reaction, suggesting that at that time, for at least three-quarters of the students, the relationship had been successful to some extent. Even those students whose reactions were negative (and they included those whose events had to be cancelled because of the economic situation as described above), there could still be lessons being learnt from the association.

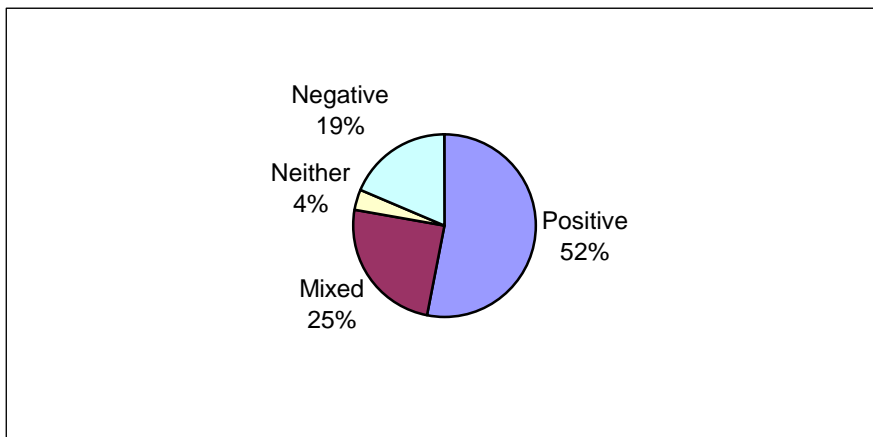


Figure 2: Students' perceptions of their group's relationship with their client

Typical comments about their clients included:

'friendly, agreeable, flexible, positive'

'Professional but not always as helpful as he could be'

'Don't communicate as much as we should. Due to the client changing often+ them being busy'

When asked why they thought that the relationship was like that, the three respondents above for example, wrote:

'polite correspondence, thoughtful of each other's ideas'

'not enough meetings with client – long distance'

'Very busy people, not enthusiastic about the event'

Several points emerged from the responses to these questions. First, that the common aim of producing a successful event helped many of the groups to bond with their client. Had this been a 'fictional' classroom exercise, that rapport might not have been created. Secondly, that communication was central to the relationship – both positively and negatively. Clients being a long distance away (e.g. the quote above) were an issue as were the clients who were too busy to become involved. One issue that had not been anticipated was that only one or two members of the group (usually the team leader or secretary) were meeting or communicating with the client and so other members of the group were only gaining experience vicariously.

The students were then given a Likert scale from 1-5 where 1 equals very *useless* through to 5 being very *useful* and asked to assess how useless or useful they thought their experience of having a client was being; first, in obtaining a placement, secondly, during their placement year and thirdly, whilst in graduate employment. The results (shown in Figure 3 below) suggest that about three-quarters of the students felt the approach would be beneficial in

employment, both during their placement (30% indicated it would be very useful) and after graduation. Just over half, believed it was being helpful in obtaining a placement.

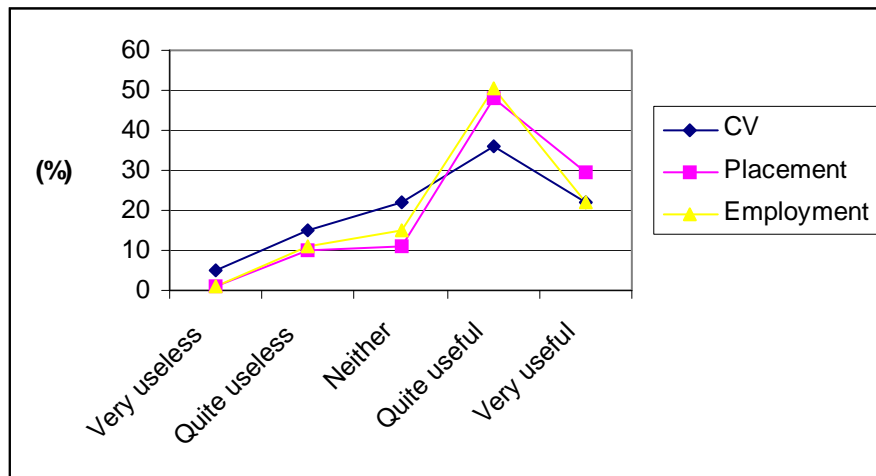


Figure 3: The usefulness of the experience of having a client

To conclude, this initial analysis suggested that the majority of the students believed the approach enhanced their employability skills.

In the second stage, generally the response from the clients was very favourable (see Table 1), with the clients rating the students as good on the majority of aspects with a particularly high score on organising a successful event. However, 2 of the 15 clients who responded rated the students poor overall. The first of these rated the students poor on communication, knowledge of event management, motivation and working together as a team. From observation, it can be stated that the client was an excellent client and was just unfortunate to be allocated a less effective group of students. In contrast, the second of the clients was the only one who was unsure whether she would want a group of students to organise an event for the organisation next year. She felt that they lacked knowledge of event management. The pertinent student group was less ambivalent, stating no, they would not recommend the organisation to be considered next year for students to organise an event. They felt that the client had been poor in supporting them and lacked enthusiasm for the event. Again from observation, in this case, it seemed the client was less effective than other clients.

Table 1 Clients' evaluation of students

Aspect	Mean	Median	Mode
Organising an event that met your organisation's requirements	4.20	4.00	5
Organising a successful event	4.36	4.50	5
Communicating with you and other stakeholders	3.93	4.00	4
Knowledge of event management	3.80	4.00	4(a)
Motivation and enthusiasm	4.20	4.00	5
Working together as a team	4.07	4.00	4
Overall, how would you rate their performance	4.20	4.00	5

(a) Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

In the student survey, the statistical means for each aspect were generally lower than for the clients (see Table 2). Where direct comparison can be made, for example in communication, the clients' mean for the students was 3.93 compared to 3.30 for the students rating the client. Similarly and very interestingly, the students generally rated their clients as having less motivation and enthusiasm for the event than the other way round.

Table 2 Students' evaluation of clients

Aspect	Mean	Median	Mode
Giving you clear instructions as to their organisation's requirements	3.90	4.00	5
Supporting you in organising the event	3.65	4.00	5
Communicating with you	3.30	3.50	5
Knowledge of event management	3.60	4.00	3(a)
Motivation and enthusiasm for the event	3.60	4.00	5
Overall, how would you rate their performance	3.60	4.00	5

(a) Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Of the 9 clients who did not return a survey, in 7 of the partnerships, the students *did* complete a questionnaire. Of these 7, the overall rating for the client is shown in Table 3. This suggests in at least two, possibly four of the partnerships, the students believed that their clients had not been very effective. Two student leaders stated that they were not sure whether they would recommend the client for next year and one stating categorically, that they would not recommend the client, supporting this view.

Table 3 The overall rating for the client, by students whose client did not respond

(Score)	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, how would you rate their performance (n)	2	0	2	2	1

In summary, three quarters of student leaders who responded recommended their client for the programme next year.

Whilst change can come through conflict or consensus, the tutors and the management team, have supported this innovation in the curriculum, contributing to its success. There was no pre-testing so assumptions have to be made about the level of increase in academic achievement, but the students and clients have generally valued it. In the student survey, one respondent wrote that they had '*gained a great experience from working on this event*'. A client wrote in hers that:

The students were absolutely fantastic... They put in extra work, attended training courses and met with me on a regular basis. They asked for advice when they needed it and added really personal touches to the event which made it very special and quite different from anything I had done before.

This surely represents what Barnett and Coate (2005) call a learning environment that offers opportunities for purposeful activity.

Conclusions

The benefits and impacts of the innovation

'In an events context impacts encompass a variety of positive benefits and negative impacts which might accrue as a result of a event taking place' (Dickinson & Shipway, 2007). This report, however, concentrates on the pedagogic aspects of the implementation rather than the events themselves. Also lack of space in this report has precluded full discussion of many of the facets of the innovation; however this section appraises the processes that affected the enhancement of the student learning experience, particularly in regard to employability.

The key finding that was anticipated and desired was that the students would have enhanced consultancy and employability skills. The quantitative data given above shows that the students believe, that this was achieved. Similarly, but to a lesser degree of support, the students felt that their ability to obtain an industry placement (required in the following academic year) had also been improved. Mason *et al.* (2006) show that structured work experience had positive effects on graduate employment and the ability to secure employment in graduate-level jobs. This finding was therefore used to advise students that a key benefit of actually organising an event is the experience it provides, which gives them an advantage in obtaining a placement as well as in subsequent employment. As they were reminded, even if aspects had gone wrong, this gave them something very useful to discuss at interviews and an opening to show how they had turned the situation around.

Furthermore, introducing a client offered opportunities to the students to gain insights into organisations and become immersed in their culture; this can be both professionally and personally beneficial. It had given them the chance to work in what Jarvis (2006) describes as *'the real-world, under slightly sheltered conditions'*. This had allowed access to an 'emergent' curriculum, (Jackson *et al.*, 2006), described by Biggs and Tang as comprising of *'problems that emerge in real life and that cannot be predicted'* (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 148). Several groups for example, had their first experiences of working with committees and the difficulties, particularly in communication and negotiation, that that can have.

The complexity of events management was highlighted and organising the events created high levels of enthusiasm amongst the students that benefited learning. Finally, although many students gain experience through volunteering at events, the unit provided an *'...opportunity to be involved in the planning stages of an event as well as the chance to work on the delivery'* (Flinn, 2008, p9).

It would be extremely difficult in any pedagogic innovation to isolate it from its learning environment and therefore it is of value to consider what might have happened had the innovation not been introduced or whether something else could have been done that would have achieved the same or greater effect. Critically, it should be recognised that there was no prior evaluation using the same methods, of the existing procedure (Stenhouse, 1975). In this case, the economic situation would still have prevailed and so events would probably still have been cancelled. However, it seems likely that the types of events determined by the clients would have been better at 'weathering' the recession than those chosen by students in the previous year.

Conclusions for practice

Possibly, the most difficult, but also the most crucial aspect of evaluation is ensuring that the findings are acted on (Hounsell, 2003; Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2001b). Therefore, recommendations for future practice and changes in the curriculum necessary to facilitate future development of the approach were made (see Box 1). However, it has to be acknowledged, that in this research as in most other, there are practical limitations to implementation, such as resource implications.

Box 1: Recommendations for the 2009-10 academic year

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Additional staffing resources should be provided – the unit was already resource-intensive, in terms of staff time. Having clients introduced additional demands in that the clients themselves needed to be supported and if the relationship failed, whether because of internal or external pressures, considerable time was required by the tutors in ensuring that students still had the appropriate learning and assessment opportunities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow-up assessment should be undertaken with students in either the mid-placement seminar or at the start of their 4th year on their return from placement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ineffective and unsupportive clients, identified by the student feedback should not be invited to participate again.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The brief to clients should be revised, be more balanced as to student capabilities, and more explicit of academic limitations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clients should be invited to the University campus for a presentation of what is required in the role to offer more information than is possible in a written communication and to allow opportunity for questions. Existing clients could be asked to give short presentations about their experiences to provide a better perspective of what might ensue.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clients should be local, rather than non-distance and preferably external to Bournemouth University to offer greater learning experiences for the students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clients should be encouraged to consider the types of events that are less likely to be affected adversely by the continuing economic downturn.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students should be supported in recognising that they are organising real events that impact on people's lives rather than the 'fictional' exercises they have undertaken in the first year of study.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Much greater emphasis should be given to making students more aware of the time, financial and travel commitments that different clients may require.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More opportunities should be created for all members of the group to engage with the client.

This study has used an action research approach to investigate the introduction of clients to the Events Management unit. Having reflected on the previous year's student events the innovation was designed, implemented and evaluated. Thereafter modifications were suggested for the following year. All of these recommendations have been implemented in either the academic year 2009-2010 (or will be in 2010-2011).

This study has shown that the introduction of clients has overall, been successful for the students and the gains to the University (which were not discussed here) can be weighed against the extra need for staff resources. As Flinn notes; *'...the experiences gained by students whilst working in the industry do not just benefit their future careers, but can also enhance their educational experiences, allowing them to put theory into practice and providing a context on which to base their learning. Indeed, many of the skills and abilities*

required of the events manager can only really be understood through experience' (Flinn, 2008, p. 8). Further research in the future would be useful to ascertain whether the clients also felt that the students had obtained enhanced consultancy and employability skills through the relationship.

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Biographical details

Following completion of an undergraduate degree in environmental studies Dorothy undertook her PhD thesis and adopted a conceptual framework of affordance theory to understand participation in garden visiting. She is currently a lecturer in Events Management at Bournemouth University and is contributing to the management of the 2010 Bournemouth Bicentennial celebrations. Her particular area of interest for research is in the interactions between people and socio-natural environments. She is at present engaged in a project comparing the perception of nature and ecotourism by visitors to Jiuzhaigou National Park in China and the New Forest National Park in England.

Pearl Morrison having studied Leisure Management as an undergraduate degree undertook post graduate studies in business management, whilst working within the events industry. As a Chartered Marketer, with industry experience in marketing she has a strong interest in adopting a customer focus in learning. Currently an Events Management tutor at Bournemouth University she has brought her industry experience to develop innovative learning programmes for students to increase their employability and enhance student learning. A special area of interest is to research the impact of these innovations on the quality of learning for the student.