

# An Event Business Learning Program: Designed to Enhance the Relevance of Education to Practice

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## Abstract

This paper intends to (1) investigate the extent of the usage of practical learning assessment at capstone level of the curriculum, (2) to establish the fundamental purpose of the event business and investigate the extent to which it remains crucial to tourism education, and (3) to assure and conclude that event business is an essential part of quality management and enhancement process of tourism education. Students in the Department of Tourism, a University in southern Taiwan, participated in the event business learning course assured that it supports their professional enhancement. The strategic alliance event and tourism businesses concluded and proved their ability and trait as well. Correspondingly, several tourism businesses inquire upon the Department of Tourism and enquire for students to work as trainees.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Event Business, Destination Marketing, Practice

## 1. Introduction

The global economic tsunami started in 2009 imposed severely influence on financial system in every country. The travel and tourism industry thrives greatly on disposable income which reaches high only when a country's economy is at prosperous period. The dramatic economic downturn leads the travel and tourism industry to a difficult position. Business travel in particular, a distinctive personal touch and friendly committed service, seize great niche in business travel industry. The event business offers a refreshing approach to delivering bespoke conferences and events, live brand experience and incentive travel.

The focus of this article is a case study of an attempt by the Department of Tourism at I-Shou University, where the authors contribute their efforts, in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan. Taiwan, located in the subtropical Southwest Pacific rim, served as a transit of transportation and economy, has been experiencing extraordinary transition in recent years due to her differential political and geographical role. With upcoming influence of technological change and business competition, Kaohsiung had lost its position as the leading shipping and cargo harbor in South East Asia.

The current leading mayor is at her second term and endeavors to reserve the cultural identity and diversity. Since Kaohsiung County was merged with Kaohsiung city on December 25, 2010, the working frame operates itself culturally and historically different. The impact was great when the region was in transition. The Kaohsiung City Government has to brand the city in order to vitalize and individualize the term "Kaohsiung" by promoting its people, specialized knowledge, culture and heritage. Correspondingly, Kaohsiung reinvented itself as a national center of business services and internationally important tourism destination, a more global city.

In the international economic climate, the creation of regional headquarter is a rising trend. Coincidences and chances remain with a coherent and consistent city brand image. Sufficient coordination with the various partners would enable the branding process started successfully. From the prospect of tourism development, the event business is very much a service industry. The city government intends to promote the city as a destination by adopting joint tourism products and project. Tourism destination product is defined as an amalgam of tourist products and services, offering an integrated experience to consumers. It has a unique character, the complexity of destination product and intrinsic characteristics of tourism.

Thus, a call for well-trained and certificated manpower aiming for the growing market has ringed the bell. Actually, to answer the need in practice, Practicum Travel Agency (PTA) has come into being in Taiwan Higher Education for long. The solid relationship built up between educational institutions and travel agencies serves as channel for practitioners and faculty members to coordinate and cooperate in preparing students for professional challenges. However, none of the PTA in Taiwan University had ignited any strategic plan for being a Destination Management Company (DMC).

## 2. Background Literature-Destination Marketing

The American Marketing Association (2004) announced the new definition of marketing:

Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) defines destination marketing as:

*Promote long-term development and marketing of a destination, focusing on convention sales, tourism marketing and services. Professionals who program destination marketing are marketing an entire destination to marketing professionals, business travelers, tour operators and individual visitors.*

Across the entire interactive platform, the stakeholders include hotels, facilities, attractions, restaurants and other providers serving travelers.

An effective experiential campaign not only establishes a market position for a brand, but can also add character to it and generate word of mouth amongst the target audience profile. Being capable of influencing travelers before the travel plan has been made, a destination marketing leader designs and manages customized marketing strategies to reaches different types of active shopper and browsers. Tourists' experiences are derived from service encounters in the course of a visit. In another words, as a trusted partner for the visitors and meeting professionals, destination marketers drive the economic success and enhance the quality of life.

The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) has set out prime destination selection criteria (article in 'Association Meetings International' magazine, Nov. 2006) which each association considers to be crucial when deciding on the destination for its event. The destination selection criteria are as follows: (1) Value for money for the association (2) Value for money for the delegate (3) Accessibility (4) Capacity to attract (5) Teamwork (6) Suitability of meeting venue (7) Quality and attractiveness of the social event venues (8) Networking opportunities (9) Association development opportunities (10) Creativity.

The Destination Management Company (DMC), known as "ground handler", works as the prime local contractor for logistical services, including (1) creative proposals for special event within the meeting (2) Pre-and post-conference tours (3) VIP amenities and transportation (4) Shuttle services (5) Staffing within the conference center (6) Entertainment, such as after-dinner speakers (7) On-site registration services (8) Accommodation services (Davidson & Rogers, 2007). The intermediaries who provide good and effective services above are tour operators in general.

In a sense, a destination delivers composite product to the buyers. The word 'product' is the amalgam of services that comprises not only tangible but also intangible elements. The word "buyer" refers to those who are in need of holding successful conventions or business events. The DMC practically and namely plays the role.

### **3. Background Literature-Education to practice**

The HEFCE review, back in 1998, had advised that "the industry values higher education for providing industry specific technical skills and practical experience" (Alexander, 2007; HEPCE, 1998, p. 3). As professional oriented curricula, authentic working life should be highlighted and integrated into the study of travel and tourism. Correspondingly, Tourism is a subject that requires operational training and the facilities necessary within a "serving" the needs industry. Has the degree program in tourism a role in preparing students for industry, the operational element of this degree cannot be omitted. Robinson, Barron & Solnet (2008) stated that the tourism industry matures; there is actually an increasing demand for well-qualified graduates with a range of attributes and skills. If the institution with tourism program fails to align their graduates with tourism industry expectation, this could restrain graduates from realizing the actual skills and traits needed for tourism career (Robinson, Barron & Solnet, 2008). Hence, experiential exercises are particularly useful and necessary in the service industry due to the emphasis placed on critical thinking skills (Phelan et al., 2009). In that sense, the tourism educator specifically plays the role in preparing graduates' acquisition of tourism industry-required professional and practical skills and traits. Phelan, Kavanaugh, Mills, & Jang's (2009) study showed that instructors valued hands-on experience and experiential teaching methods resulted in higher levels of learning and active participation.

Alexander (2007) claimed that institutions providing operational training in the professional practices could offer as part of a more balanced curriculum for students to develop skills at both a practical and theoretical level. The discipline, tourism, identified with any practical or academic issues is also associated with training facilities. Among all the relevant facilities, the practicum travel agency (works as a DMC in this study) plays a core role in establishing a holistic spectrum of learning environment. An Event Business Learning program provides the disciplines, operating, and know-how for students who intend to work in the tourism industry. Though Alexander, Lynch & Murray (2009) stated that operational training has become an "expensive, resource-intensive, fixed location and fixed timetable" problem for numerous higher education institutions (Gillespie & Baum, 2000, p. 148.), many Tourism programs in Taiwan higher education still proclaim practicum travel agency (PTA) as their core training facility. This might be ascribed to different social and educational circumstances, but none of the PTA within any Taiwan University campus had ignited any strategic plan for being a Destination Management Company (DMC).

Some researchers (Lashley & Barron, 2005; Aubke, 2009) suggested that the way tourism students learn and behave in an educational environment may be similarly distinct, and for most of the time they are taught and

guided in cohort that is distinctly different from other student cohorts (Horton, Clarke, & Welpott, 2005; Aubke, 2009). Since the workforce for tourism is distinguished by seasonality, mobility, dynamism, and entrepreneurialism (Donkin, 2002; Robinson, Barron & Solnet, 2008), the university tourism academics would definitely agree that the practical experience is the critical training for professional preparation in the tourism industry. The experiential exercise is the instructional technique used for professional preparation providing the opportunity for students to gain work experience through on-campus travel agency, restaurant, or hotel (Xie, 2004; Phelan et al., 2009). Students can continue to integrate learning through the guided application based on academic foundation in a business setting. However, different applications of practical training could vary from student to student in different school years. Thus, Alexander, Lynch & Murray (2009) did conclude that the extent of the usage of practicum facilities across different level of the curriculum needed further investigation. Practical learning programs along with solid practicum facilities on campus definitely deliver a Win-Win strategy for students.

This paper has the following specific aims:

1. To investigate the extent of the usage of practical learning assessment at capstone level of the curriculum.
2. To establish the fundamental purpose of event business tourism and investigate the extent to which it remains as the core of tourism education.
3. To assure and conclude that event business is an essential part of quality management and enhancement process of tourism education.

#### **4. Methods**

##### **4.1 The Capstone Course: Destination Bidding & Planning**

The event business learning program combines exhibition practices with educational activities. Such program provides event business and tourism educators with an avenue for heightening students' awareness of and ability to practice as a professional in the event business industry. This article reports on the design, implementation, and evaluation of an event business learning program entitled "Destination Marketing Program." The Program focused on event business strategic planning, bidding, destination promotion as well as presentation skills.

In order to prepare future event business professionals who are knowledgeable and skilled in destination marketing field, as well as address the tourism opportunities in Taiwan, the I-Shou University developed an innovative education to practice program entitled "Destination Marketing Program." The primary purpose of this program was to provide students majoring in the MICE Organizing Program, concentration of Department of Tourism, with classroom instruction on destination marketing and direct application of that knowledge when working with a team. A secondary purpose was to provide industry-academia interaction and cooperation to build solid manpower for the event business industry.

Certainly, students who participate in this program will also have finished prerequisite courses so that they have a clear idea how a DMC works. To operate in coordination, courses entitled "practical training I & II" and "internship" are particularly in place so that students have opportunities to become familiar with real-world applications. The practicum travel agency works as an acting venue for students to operate all the administrative matters and routine work. Therefore the curricula could be wholly and successfully linked up with the conduct of practicum travel agency (DMC). Pertaining to the theme of this article, practical training I & II contribute greatly for those students who would like to take part in the event business tourism industry in choosing track "MICE organizing" as their focused field.

A successful partnership was implemented between the Department of Tourism, I-Shou University and Formosa Tour & Educational Institute in Taiwan. Students were delegated with full responsibility as practical training travel agency staff for practicum programs that serve I-Shou students, faculty members, and visitor to E-DA World. Several tutors were assigned to the practicum travel agency (PTA/DMC) for supervision by the faculty members. Feedback from students and faculty evaluations provide as a solid mechanism in synchronizing tourism pedagogy and professional enhancement.

The Practical Training I & II were designed and organized for students at the Department of Tourism of I-Shou University in the spring semester for sophomore and the whole school year for junior. Students choosing "MICE Organizing" as their specified minor are required to be involved in Destination Marketing Program that were initiated by the Department of Tourism and Formosa Tour & Educational Institute. The mechanism of apprenticeship virtually is the spirit of this practical training. The junior students managed to lead and guide sophomore ones during the conduct of practical training. In another words, the junior in the department of tourism should always acts as mentor for underclassmen.

##### **4.2 Design and Implementation of the Destination Marketing Program**

Over the courses taken of four semesters, undergraduate students majoring in the Event Business Planning Program, minor of Department of Tourism, at the I-Shou University were invited to participate in the Destination

Marketing Contest Program. Students who participated in the destination marketing program had taken Introduction to MICE, MICE Planning, Marketing for MICE, English for MICE, and Presentation Skills for MICE. Moreover, each of them had passed the National Tour Guide and Leader Examinations and earned Certificates of Tour Guide and Tour Leader in Taiwan.

During the first classroom session in the fall semester of sophomore year, students' consent for participation in the evaluation component of the program was secured. Participants in the program also included referees and teams from other faculty members and students. Several tutors were nominated by the faculty members and to arrange for regular meetings in order to secure consent and consistency for participation in this program and gather and edit data and information needed for future evaluation.

Not registering for any semester hour course, students volunteered to cooperate with each other as a team. They participated in classroom instruction during the first five weeks of the semester. Course content focused on event business strategic planning, bidding, destination promotion as well as presentation skills. Following the five weeks of classroom instruction, the student participated in the destination marketing program were assigned into different groups in charge of data researching and gathering, editing and formatting, promotion and marketing, and presentation.

A course manual was developed for the program that included information on the topics covered during class instruction. The faculty member and the leader affiliated with the program were available to discuss any problems or issues that arose. Students communicated with the faculty member via weekly meetings and weekly bilingual presentation practice on campus. Following each weekly session the student completed a log that called for reflection on his or her learning and practice. The value of reflection, through the small group discussions and weekly log, providing a project that was desired by and efficient to the team. At the end of the semester students and faculty convened to evaluate the program and celebrate the students' accomplishment.

#### **4.3 Destination Management Company: Practicum Travel Agency**

Among all the on-site training facilities, the practicum travel agency (DMC) is particularly designed and established by the Department of Tourism. The facilities within the practicum Travel Agency include LCD monitors, multimedia equipments, portable computers, travel information system, office furniture, and micro-library of tourism information. The interior design of the Practicum Travel Agency includes everything that a real travel agency needs and itself actually works as a real one. Students who participate in the program shall be on duty and shifts everyday on site unless they have to conduct a tour for certain assignment. Therefore, the Practicum Travel Agency actually plays a transit network for students wherever or whenever they need to contact the Department of Tourism Office. Strategic alliance with Formosa Tours & Education Institute, a leading tour operator in Taiwan, enables students to work in real-world application and expose themselves to those promising event business leaders in the meantime.

#### **4.4 Program Resources**

The E-DA world consisted of 5-star hotel, Crown Plaza, and 4-star hotel, Skylark hotel, shopping mall, theme park, and the I-Shou University integrate as a University Town in the Kuan-In scenic area. It has become the main facilities that students used during the preparing session on campus. During the semester prior to the implementation of the program, the faculty member and leader attended destination marketing and exhibition design training program provided by Taiwan External Trade Development Council, TAITRA and worked on the development of the program manual and initiated contact with event business companies. During the first three weeks of the semester, the faculty member was responsible for teaching topics pertaining to destination marketing, facilitating discussion during the weekly meeting in order to decide the topic, logo, slogan, graphics and design of exhibition booth. The leader of the destination marketing team was responsible for collecting students' weekly power point projects and managed to team up students for bilingual presentation in the destination marketing contest held correspondingly in the 2012 Taiwan Exhibition & Convention Industry Show in Taipei, Taiwan.

A course manual was developed for the program that included information on the topics covered during class instruction. The faculty member and the tutors affiliated with the program were available to discuss any problems or issues that arose. Students communicated with the faculty member via weekly meetings on campus. Following each weekly session the student completed a log that called for reflection on his or her learning and practice. The learning log was considered a relatively consistent way to monitor students' progress and able to avoid confusion and nervousness through traditional reviewing method: interview taping (Katajavuri, Lindblom-Ylanne & Hirvonen, 2006).

At the end of the semester students and faculty convened to evaluate the program and celebrate the students' accomplishment. The faculty members who facilitate the courses were the reviewers of tour execution. Students would feel more secured in uttering their actual feelings and consequently the true results and achievement of the

program should be converted into students' actual professional competencies.

After interviewing with program participants, the results turn out to be far more pleasing and satisfactory. For not only students assured the Destination Marketing program support their professional enhancement but also some travel and tourism businesses concluded and proved their ability and trait. Correspondingly, some relevant businesses, GISgroup Taiwan leading PCO & DMC Company for example, inquire upon the Department of Tourism and enquire for students to work as trainees.

### **5. Finding & Student Experiences**

The students described how they enjoyed participating different stages of preparing for an exhibition and campaign. That was quite a challenge with regard to their academic thinking and practice in real. The junior class students especially appreciated the opportunity to interact with sophomore students. The views and opinions that are valued by the students involved in the contest program. The junior students felt that this particular experience was positive because it provided the students with the opportunity to see how an exhibition booth was built. Betty described this in her interview:

"I wasn't aware of a lot of the situations. I never participated in an exhibition before."

Nevertheless, some of the challenges or negative experiences had to do with personal factors that detracted from personality or academic and practical preparation. For sophomore students, with their lack of knowledge and personal experience in the previous subjects that were not covered, which made it difficult for them to contribute meaningfully to the discussion and practice. However, that was the original purpose of this program to prove that the mechanism of apprenticeship virtually is the spirit of this practical training.

Process and outcome evaluation were used to describe students' experiences and to access the impact of the program on students' knowledge and skill. Process evaluation consisted of students' completion of weekly log reporting the progress after each meeting. Peer reviews of each partner's contribution and efforts were conducted for the learning program by the end of the semester.

This research has important curriculum implication as it examines the effectiveness and utility of the inclusion of participation in 2012 EXCO destination marketing contest in MICE courses. The results suggest that inter-schoolyear cooperation and integration meetings may be innovative and effective teaching assessment, particularly in terms of MICE theory to practical quality experiences. Students found that the experiences rewarding and valued the opportunity for practical learning and academic growth. Having the opportunity to interact with one another and share their perspectives with regard to different understanding of the MICE industry.

The results of this study provide insight into how the faculty in the tourism department facilitates the students in developing the project for exhibition installation. Critical competencies and best setting related to booth design and destination marketing resulted in educational experiences most appropriate for acquiring specific knowledge and skills.

### **6. Conclusion**

In responding to aims of the study, this paper describes the experience of a tourism department that furnished students with a program responsibility that would facilitate practicum travel agency as Destination Management Company. By integrating the principles of "Destination Marketing," "MICE organizing" and "Practice of Tour Guide & Tour Manager" classes with onsite application, the department faculty members provided a cooperative learning environment for students to be socialized to the expectations of the tourism industry.

From the fundamental to practical and advanced curricula designed for cultivating a professional tour manager, this study suggests that the existence of the practical learning program certainly remains as the core of tourism education and practice. In preparing students for professional challenges, strategic alliance with event and tourism businesses has become imperative for tourism discipline in higher education. Thus, the DMC/practicum travel agency did provide an opportunity for the department of tourism and students to work as a team in running a program that responds to parents and industry market that ask for quality management and enhancement of tourism education.

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