

Introducing Applied Dissertations:

Opportunities for Industry Connection in Postgraduate Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process of developing a model for Applied Dissertations in taught postgraduate tourism programmes. It suggests Applied Dissertations afford students the opportunity to engage in learning through and for work. Secondly, as learning demands the direct incorporation of external agents and knowledges, Applied Dissertations emerge as complex adaptive systems; a series of dynamic, fluid and complex interrelations. Finally, the paper explores the ways in which Applied Dissertations encourage students to become reflexive practitioners as they review and learn from their experiences.

Key words: industry, dissertation, postgraduate, tourism, applied learning

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the opportunities for creating industry connections for taught postgraduate students studying on tourism MSc programmes in a UK University. Using a range of teaching styles and techniques, the programmes (MScs in Tourism Marketing; Tourism Management and Tourism Development, with a fourth MSc in International Events Management being introduced subsequent to data collection), have been designed specifically to offer students an in-depth grounding, understanding and appreciation of both the theoretical and applied aspects of tourism. Thus, in addition to the high level of academic content, the learning environment also embraces current industry practice via a range of guest lectures, fieldtrips as well as the inclusion of current research findings within teaching material. Nevertheless, it was felt that the programmes lacked the opportunities afforded by direct and prolonged industry contact. The aim, therefore, was to establish a means of enabling students' first-hand connection with industry as an integral element of their learning experience. Thus, the initiative would provide students with the opportunity to widen the scope of their current study to work directly with industry, enhance their employability, and provide support for students' personal and professional development. Finally, the introduction of such an initiative holds the potential to increase the competitiveness of tourism programmes in an increasingly demanding and competitive market place.

The outcome was the development of the Applied Dissertation (AD) initiative. Embracing the opportunity for direct industry connection, ADs offer students a pathway to complete their MSc dissertation via an industry-led and devised research project that highlights areas of current concern to industry partners. The first section of the paper considers the developmental stages of concretising the AD initiative. The paper then conceptualises learning through ADs and explores the opportunities afforded by introducing this mode of study into postgraduate tourism programmes. First, drawing upon the pedagogy of work-based learning, it suggests ADs afford students the opportunity to engage in learning through work or indeed learning for work (Gray, 2001). Learning is therefore made more effective as it emerges as a fusion of applying classroom-based knowledge and learning by engaging directly with industry. Secondly, as learning demands the direct incorporation of external agents and knowledges, ADs emerge as complex adaptive systems; a series of dynamic, fluid and complex interrelations. Finally, the paper presents the ways in which ADs encourage students to become reflexive practitioners as they review and learn from their experiences. Thus, ADs facilitate learning as a series of active performances that emerge through the dynamic triangulation of student, academic supervisor and industry provider.

METHODOLOGY

The project was initially researched and implemented over the academic years 2006-07 and 2007-08. Secondary and primary data collection was conducted throughout 2006-07 with the final AD initiative being implemented in September 2007. The initiative is therefore now in its third year with the third cohort of students currently engaged in their dissertation research.

First, analysis was conducted on both competitor and University MSc programmes offering industry/placement opportunities to taught MSc students. A competitor analysis was conducted with all other UK Universities currently offering Tourism MSc programmes with options of work placements. Key findings indicated that while the opportunity for industry connection was limited. Some universities offered formal work placements whereby students spent between 6 and 12 months working in industry. Such placement opportunities either prior to starting study or alternatively on completion of the degree programme. Finally, one institution offered students the opportunity to complete “short placements” during the course of their studies. In support of the external competitor analysis, an internal analysis of current University practice was also completed. Findings provided a cross-section of programmes across three faculties including health care and nursing; environmental strategy; and performing arts. The results of these initial analyses indicated that the most common formats for introducing direct industry contact to students was through: the introduction of a placement year, work placements as an elective module and finally, informal ‘work shadowing’. In addition to what was to become the Applied Dissertation initiative, these provided the foundation for the development of four key models for the introduction of direct industry contact in our MSc programmes. Each of these will be discussed later in the paper.

Secondly, a vital component of the development of the AD initiative was gaining an understanding the perspectives of the students currently studying on the tourism MSc programmes. A focus group was therefore conducted with a sample of MSc students from across the three Tourism MSc programmes. In total 5 students participated, providing a sample of approximately 10% of the tourism postgraduate student cohort. The sample ranged in: programme studied, gender, age, nationality, future career direction, and previous work experience. Students were recruited via email, were provided with an information sheet and were required to sign a consent form before the focus group started. Research was conducted early in the second semester and students had already attended a “dissertation ideas session” and submitted dissertation proposals for their forthcoming research. As such, they were familiar with their courses, the range of teaching and learning styles, assessments, had experience of selecting dissertation topics and had completed a sufficient percentage of their studies to be able to make informed and reasoned comment on the perceived benefits and shortfalls of the conceptual and logistical processes of the AD initiative.

Discussion emerged around a series of key issues including: the perceived benefits and opportunities, limitations or problems associated with ADs; the benefits of industry engagement through research; the opportunity for engaging in ‘real’ current issues facing industry; perceived opportunities for enhancing employability, personal and professional development; and, the attractiveness of ADs in establishing competitive advantage. Students were encouraged to speak freely within an informal setting (Veal, 2006). The informality and conversational nature of the focus group also allowed flexibility as students were encouraged to reflect upon their own experiences or the potential benefits or limitations of this alternative mode of study (see Cloke, Crang, Goodwin, Painter & Philo, 2003; Mason, 2002). This was particularly important as students were able to highlight issues that had previously eluded consideration. The focus group was recorded

and transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were used. Data were analysed manually using thematic analysis from which key issues were identified (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Finally, in addition to the student perspective, it was particularly important to secure the industry perspective to assess the viability and feasibility of the AD model. Short, informal conversational interviews were held with 14 potential providers. Interviews were held both face-to-face during meetings or over the telephone. Potential providers were identified via a purposive sampling method (see Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003) and identified a range of respondents including: tour operators, travel journalists, non-Governmental organisations, charities, societies, and tourist offices. Prior to discussions, all potential providers were emailed two documents outlining the “key issues for employers” and the proposed “timeline” at which each stage of the AD process would take place (see Figure 1). Such was the positive response to the AD initiative that all industry respondents subsequently offered research projects as ADs.

TOWARDS A MODEL FOR APPLIED DISSERTATIONS

As aforementioned, four models were identified as potential pathways to develop postgraduate opportunity for industry contact. These were: the introduction of an additional placement year, an elective module and informal ‘work shadowing’ as well as what was to become the AD initiative. Attention now turns to the processes through which each option was developed and evaluated before final conclusions were drawn as to the suitability, relevance, applicability and viability of each as meeting the requirements of this initiative.

Extending Current MSc to a 2-year Programme with 1-Year Placement

Following the practice of some competitors, the first of the options considered proposed the extension of current one year programmes to become one year taught MSc programme with an additional year long placement before graduation. This model would include an ‘opt-out’ option should students not be able to find a placement. However, after discussion with colleagues and senior management and with feedback from students, this option was rejected. Indeed, while several authors highlight the benefits of year long placements (or internships) (see for example Busby, 2003; Busby, Brunt & Baber, 1997; Leslie & Richardson, 2000), citing: broadening knowledge, creating awareness, influencing career choice, including the development of students both personally and professionally in “adherence to business values” (Tribe, 2001), this relates predominantly to undergraduate rather than postgraduate study. Indeed, findings suggest the benefits of offering industry connection are in fact outweighed by the additional year required to complete the programme of study at postgraduate level. Not only would such a move compromise the competitiveness of programmes, but students cited increased financial costs and associated implications as limiting the viability and attractiveness of an additional year. The negative consequence of this was unanimously expressed by students and as Mary suggested:

“because this Masters degree is quite expensive for all of us and we chose it because of the name and the School...it is still a high price. It is a sacrifice. The possibility to do this kind of experience is really, really, really good but if it affects

the price”.... “absolutely I would choose one year”.

Finally, compounding students' aversion to an additional year was the issue of visas and visa requirements. While home and EU students would not require visas to engage in a placement year, international students would be subject to extended visa requirements. In turn, this would require the course be officially recognised as a two year programme as in order to receive visas, the work placement cannot extend beyond the end of the course. Additionally, as part of tier four requirements, the University is required to report on student attendance or lack thereof during the course of their studies. Thus, such reporting may prove potentially problematic as the University would become reliant on placement providers for the collation of such data.

Introducing a Placement Elective Module

The second option, the introduction of a placement as elective module, would comprise of a 4-6 week placement block at the end of the second semester before students begin dissertation research. While providing students intensive industry experience, several concerns arose. With regard to teaching, concerns arose regarding contact time and the quality of learning students would receive in a relatively short industry placement. Regarding logistics, concerns arose as students would be required to secure placements in their first semester to ensure participation to ensure where no placements were secured students were able to select a replacement module. Indeed, the demands to find, apply for and secure such placements were felt to place new students under too much pressure. As Tucker & Ang (2007) suggest, for international students in particular, the acclimatisation process for new students can bring with it a range of experiences including:

“heightened physical and emotional upheaval attributed to displacement and acclimatisation to a new environment, feelings of anxiety, loss of control, lack of confidence, insecurity, stress, isolation, frustration and anger” (: 2).

Such difficulties can directly influence the academic performance of students (Sawir, 2005) as well as their social acclimatisation within their new peer group (Wong, 2004; Burns, 1991). Therefore, as the majority of MSc students enrolled on the MSc programmes are international students, or perhaps have no industry experience, the intensely short timeframe for securing placements and the intense level of work required to do so, was felt to hold potentially detrimental consequences. Furthermore, the timing of this module would require students to work over Spring break and submit assignments on their return, thus placing insurmountable pressure on students to not only complete assignments, but also study for exams as well as ensuring a successful transition from industry back into the university environment.

Introducing an 'Informal', Optional Placement Opportunity

The final option to be discarded was providing students with an “optional extra” short and informal placement with no credit-bearing modular structure that would take place during the Spring break. In effect, this would be a form of ‘work shadowing’. While some authors (see Herr & Watts, 1988; Simkins et al, 2009) realise the merits of such potentially

fleeting industry engagement, the informal nature of work shadowing where students observe role(s) and associated practices and procedures within an organisation, may directly limit the potential gain for students. Indeed, the informal of work shadowing was not felt to reflect the objectives of this initiative. Thus, to maximise the benefits of direct industry connection and achieve a 'value-added' experience (see Guile & Griffiths, 2001; Orrell, 2004; Smith & Betts, 2000), the initiative would not only require a deeper immersion into the industry environment, but a formal structure with clear assessment and credit-bearing status in order to enhance the learning value of the experience. Therefore, where students were interested in engaging in such 'work-shadowing', it would not be an integrated element of their degree, but rather they would be supported in their search for such experience.

TOWARDS A MODEL FOR APPLIED DISSERTATIONS

Retaining the key benefits of the developments outlined above, the final model of ADs provides students an alternative to studying for a 'traditional' dissertation as they apply to complete their MSc dissertation via an industry-led and devised research project that highlights areas of current concern to industry. In line with the traditional dissertation, ADs are set firmly within a clear theoretical framework and explore an issue in-depth by: using an inductive approach, developing and testing a hypothesis or evaluating a theory. Students are required to provide critical analysis, synthesis, interpretation and application of theory in an applied environment. Research is conducted through the use of a single case-study approach and students are required to engage in primary data collection that is conducted by spending approximately 1 or 2 days a week with their industry provider over the course of an 8-week period.

While ADs are designed to mirror the requirements of Traditional Dissertations (see Figure 1), the optional nature of this mode of study and the role of industry providers as initially devising the research project, requires students to 'apply' for a limited number of industry-led AD projects. Thus, several differences arise. First, the process of application for ADs begins in semester one. Students can submit up to two applications (complete with CVs and covering letters) by late November. Applications are then short-listed before final selections are made by industry-providers and the outcomes are shared with students in semester 2. Students are also required to submit both an AD proposal and traditional dissertation proposal in semester two, thus ensuring if unsuccessful in their application, the administrative process for traditional dissertations remains unaffected. Nevertheless reflecting upon experiences of acclimatisation (Tucker & Ang, 2007), students expressed reservations with the application beginning in semester one: *"how can I propose myself to an employer if I don't know what I am going to do, I don't know what I am good at. I wouldn't feel comfortable...if I think of me in December, no way"* (Mary). Brenda supported this concern as: *"maybe (students) would like to attend but it's too early. They haven't learned something about tourism"*. Such concerns were however quelled as students realised that variety and choice are integral elements to their application and up to two applications can be submitted with no restriction on the topic(s) chosen. Concerns were further alleviated as students reflected on their ability to identify their strengths through the modules they had studied to date: *"I think it's still good because you could use your elective modules to...cater to what you are researching and*

then use the assignments...to...do some background work” (Tanya). From this point, ADs follow the same timeline as traditional dissertations as students begin meeting with supervisors in mid-April, conduct fieldwork/analysis/write up findings during June to August and submit their dissertations in late August/early September.

Given these differences, several steps have been incorporated to familiarise students with ADs. A dissertation ideas session is held midway through semester one. ADs are introduced at this point and students are provided with an AD handbook that contains all the key information as well as the required forms (e.g. AD proposal form, responsibilities of student form, document of agreement, etc) and pre-approved research projects are presented. An online learning environment also ensures students have access to all documentation regarding ADs as well as support for writing CVs and covering letters. Furthermore, students are also able to use the online discussion forums to raise questions or request clarification of any aspect of the initiative (see Figure 2 for example of pages on the University’s online learning environment).

[pic]

Figure 1: Applied Dissertation Timeline

[pic]

Figure 2: Examples of ULearn online support for students

CONCEPTUALISING LEARNING THROUGH APPLIED DISSERTATIONS

Attention now turns to conceptualising ADs and outlining the opportunities afforded by introducing ADs into MSc programmes. While the fields of science and technology exhibit similar forms of learning, there remains a distinct lack of supporting pedagogic research. Thus to facilitate the development of a conceptual framework, the paper draws upon literature from work-based learning in higher education and learning as a complex adaptive system.

Learning *Through And For Work*

“There needs to be no mystique about work-based learning; the propositions on which it rests are simple enough – that effective learning can take place at the workplace, and not only in the formal academic setting of the lecture theatre and the laboratory, and that we learn through the experience of work itself” (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992: 4).

It is from this philosophy that the need to develop an opportunity for direct postgraduate engagement with industry arose. By adopting a framework directly influenced by work-based learning, students are offered the opportunity to engage in learning through work or indeed learning for work (Gray, 2001). Thus, students engage in a mechanism for learning that develops current learning strategies through the effective application of classroom-based knowledge and learning as by engaging directly with industry “learning is being made more effective” (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992: 6). As Gray (2001) suggests, work-based learning facilitates an environment within which learning arises from action

and problem solving, thus in ADs, learning arises as students engage with 'live' projects currently facing industry.

As Kemple, Poglinco & Snipes (1999) suggest, partnerships through industry engagement can influence career awareness. Brodie & Irving (2007) recognise the opportunity to develop employability skills through learning in the work environment and acknowledge that:

"the skills and abilities needed on graduation by today's students are the same as those of employees already in the workplace, who seek to manage and adapt to change and the demands of the complex employment situations"(: 12).

While ADs do not offer the prolonged immersion of work-based learning, students recognise the opportunity they provide for professional development. As Tanya said, *"I think it will be good to lead you into a fulltime career...it will enhance your CV as actual experience as opposed to just doing the research"*. All students expressed the difficulty in gaining experience of working in the tourism industry and envisaged ADs would provide the valuable link with industry that would enhance this aspect of their CV:

"the problem I am facing now is that I have to start somewhere...so it could be a good way to have....a valuable working experience to start the career you really want"... "it's a starting point to create your professional figure"... "it helps you build your professional figure in terms of, OK I am coming out of university, what am I? I am a tourist developer? How can I prove it? I mean it is just written on a paper and nobody knows" (Mary).

This was particularly felt by international students, who identified strongly with the opportunity to obtain overseas experience of working that facilitate their future *"self promotion"* (Martin) as:

"I mean experience of working in foreign countries...will bring you previous experience when you come back to your own country. It is something special and the employer will find you are better than the other guys" (Martin).

Such professional development also related to students' identity and experience as researchers as many echoed Mary's comments that *"to do the job they are asking for to find a solution to that problem, but some kind of research besides that will help us to develop our research skills and problem solving"*. Such reaffirmation of experiential learning therefore mobilises the potential for students to reinforce what Hyland (1996) refers to as the *"ethical bases of professional practice"* (: 168). Engaging directly with the 'real' concerns and issues facing industry can serve to further stimulate students' motivation for value-based professional development. As Martin commented:

"if we do pick a topic for our research (traditional dissertation), it's just not a real one...we don't know if it's useful in reality and sometimes I will feel...lack of motivation. Yeah, if you can deal with some problems in a company it is different"

It is through *"experiential"* learning and the application of theory in a 'real' situation that enables not only theory to inform practice, but also practice to inform theory as it emerges through the integration of (research) work and study (Trigwell & Reid, 1998). As learning is acquired in the midst of practice (Raelin, 1998), the potential effectiveness of such applied learning as outlined by Gray (2001) and Duckenfield & Stirner (1992) is further evident as Tanya echoed such opinion in that: *"if you are actually working for someone then its going to give you more structure and probably finish with better"*

research than if you were doing it and it was going to be on the library shelf". Jane too realised the benefits as she commented: *"I think it is a good opportunity for us to apply what we have learnt into practice and...make contact with the local people (industry) in the process"*. Such notions of students becoming empowered within their learning also emerges as some expressed that they would be able to make a difference by studying for an AD: *"the only thing is that I know at the end of the summer that is what is going to happen to it, it will go on the shelf and maybe someone will use it next year as reference list but other than that there's really no purpose of it other than for myself...I wish it could be used for something more, that's why doing an applied placement dissertation...would be beneficial"* (Tanya). Likewise, Mary felt that: *"If I could write something that could be useful for somebody else, it's like, it's self-esteem"*.

Learning through Partnerships

Moving beyond the classroom-based environment demands the direct incorporation of external agents and knowledges into the learning environment. Thus, due to the industry-led nature of ADs, learning becomes "the creation of knowledge as a shared and collective activity, one in which people discuss ideas and share problems and solutions" (Gray, 2001: 10). Learning emerges through a series of dynamic, fluid and complex interrelations and "the group and people that are a part of it are a system because they consist of a set of connected or interdependent people and things" (Mennin, 2007: 306). As such, the framework and practices of ADs emerges as a complex adaptive system as researching a 'real life' industry problem demands a multiplicity of issues are addressed simultaneously. Thus, dissertation research moves towards an adaptive paradigm and mode of study that is no longer self-contained as is often evident in traditional dissertations. Rather, research emerges through complex, active inter-negotiations between all parties (students, academic supervisors and industry providers), each holding individual interests and demands from the research.

As such, a fundamental element of this mode of study is that students are empowered to bring their own ideas and insights to the research process. Indeed, while industry providers initially devise research projects to reflect an issue they are currently facing, throughout the course of the research students become increasingly equal partners (Smith & Betts, 2000) alongside the supervisor and AD provider. Such partnerships demand flexibility in learning as students become increasingly empowered, creative and adaptive in their responses and actions. Thus, learning arises through proaction and reaction as it is constantly changing and updated through negotiation (Smith & Betts, 2000). Opportunity therefore exists for student creativity and influence within the direction of research, the theoretical framework within which research is situated and the methodology adopted as industry partners relinquish absolute control over the aims and objectives of the project and encourage students to negotiate alternative and previously hidden research pathways. Thus, they adopt the roles of mentors, facilitators and gatekeepers to avenues of primary data collection. Such innovative opportunities for learning were recognised by the students as:

"maybe they will also be interested in finding innovative solutions...taking things in another direction"..."(dissertation is) a moment where you are, we are putting your

ideas and you have the freedom to do that so you can try to find different perspectives, solutions and so on. You have not just to give practical advice. Ok, yes this problem is usually solved this way, so I cannot avoid to do that and this is my topic, this is my dissertation....but please leave me that freedom” (Mary).

Such thoughts were echoed by Tanya as:

“I am here for my academic (degree), not to do their work, so they have to give and take and I wouldn’t want to work for someone who wasn’t interested because this is a Masters dissertation not free labour...I think there’s a fine line”.

Therefore the flexibility and freedom to exercise intellectual creativity was important to students. Such negotiation is reflected in the AD framework as students are provided with only a research outline and are encouraged by industry providers to fine-tune the project specifications as well as construct their own methodological framework for realising project aims and objectives.

All parties therefore become “semi-autonomous agents” (Dooley, 1996) each holding their own interpretation of reality. As MacDaniel & Driebe (2001) suggest:

“agents are different from each other, have different histories and the capability of exchanging information with each other, themselves and their environment. Each agent has different information about their system and none have enough information to understand the system in its entirety”.

As such ADs become a complex negotiation and sharing of knowledge. They are an active performance of learning within which parties exchange information, knowledge and expectations. Learning emerges via interaction within the complex landscapes of agents. Such landscapes of applied learning therefore not only reflect the individual needs, wants and expectations of agents, but also produce collective landscapes as agents come together within the learning environment. Such collectiveness emerges between students and supervisors, students and industry providers, industry providers and supervisors as well as a fusion of all three in a nonlinear fashion (Dooley, 1991).

However, the complexity of such relations requires clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each party. Research aims and objectives are initially presented by industry providers within the research proposal and through the dynamic triangulated communication between student, academic supervisor and industry provider, these are moulded as each party contributes to the development of the project via their individual expert knowledges, reflections and experience (see Figure 4). However, while work-based learning often agrees “a learning contract or agreement with describes ‘outcomes’ in terms of learning objectives” (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992: 5), for ADs, agreements on outcomes are supplemented with a document of agreement that outlines the responsibilities of each party as well as a “responsibilities of the student” document. By developing formalised relations between parties, ADs move away from the traditional, structured approach to learning of traditional dissertations as semi-isolated learning environments and embrace the complexities of multiple agent engagement. Akin to work-based learning, students therefore become partially integrated into industry as they adopt a ‘consultancy’-style approach to learning. Indeed, unlike work-based learning ADs do not involve a period of full-time (paid or unpaid) employment for a range of timeframes up to one year. Rather, students work on a voluntary, unpaid research project and in

adopting a pseudo-consultancy role, they are granted access to data and spend time in the organisation for up to two or three days a week over a period of up to eight weeks.

[pic]

Figure 4: The Dynamic Triangulation of Learning

Adapting Through Reflexivity

Finally, ADs further echo the principles of work-based learning as they encourage students to become reflexive practitioners and offer the scope for the acquisition of new knowledge that encourages students to learn to learn (Gray, 2001). Such reflexivity in learning facilitates not only academic maturity but directly impacts on the professional and personal development of students. The challenges of learning through partnerships and the complexities of learning require students to reflect upon not only the academic demands of their work, but the emotional, social, cultural, political and historical contexts within which actions and behaviours, reactions and responses are realised. As Duckenfield & Stirner (1992) suggest opportunities arise for:

“practical application of knowledge and the development of operational skills, personal development in terms of greater confidence and maturity, a better understanding of business, improved communication and interpersonal skills, and intellectual development through the sharpening of analytical abilities”.

While students studying for ADs do not experience the same prolonged exposure to industry practice as students on placements, the structure of their research, the intensity of data collection combined with the demands of ensuring effective communication between parties and the successful completion of the research according to research objectives requires they develop as independent learners. As such, they can become reflexive learners. Indeed, while not an employee of the organisation, in working closely with the industry provider within both the university and industry setting, students are exposed to the everyday practices of their chosen industry environment. Thus, working within a complex adaptive system, it is essential students develop not only as independent academic researchers, but as team players and project managers as they become responsible for the successful completion of an industry ‘consultancy’ project.

CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTIONS ON AD IN PRACTICE

This paper has outlined the development of ADs as a mode of study that facilitates direct industry engagement for taught postgraduate students. From initial conception as a one-year placement, an elective module or an “informal” pseudo work-shadowing opportunity, the AD initiative has been established as an innovative pathway that brings students, AD providers and academic supervisors together in a dynamic triangulation of learning.

Overall, the introduction of ADs has been strongly and positively received by industry, staff and students alike. It is felt that this initiative will continue to provide students with a value-added experience that directly contributes to their professional and personal development throughout the course of their MSc programme. Indeed, the demand for ADs has increased year on year with over 25 successfully completed or in progress through this initiative. As can be seen from the following student responses, it is proving successful not only for students, but also for the industry partners who provide the research opportunities. As Maggie reflected on her experience:

“one of my most unforgettable experiences at Surrey was the Applied Dissertation. I worked with Forest Research, the research agency of the Forestry Commission, with the support of the local forest management team, to evaluate the effectiveness of visitor management practice on woodland heritage trails. In this project, I was able to combine my academic knowledge with real industrial situations, and further developed my applied skills in tourism marketing research”.

Likewise, Rachel shared her experiences of working with The Adventure Travel Company:

“The main focus was on determining The Adventure Company’s achievement in putting responsible tourism into action; and subsequently testing its existing consumers responses to company’s performances. The project involved using an internet questionnaire to collect numerous relevant samples for demonstrating a wider population. Results were compared with previous empirical research and the company’s current responsible performances. The findings were to be used in the company’s future developments for implementing responsible tourism approaches as well as for its distribution to the entire industry in this field from the market’s perspective. It was a great experience to combine academic theories with real industrial situations”.

The range of AD opportunities offered to students has continually increased, with over 21 projects offered from 9 industry providers for the academic year 2009-10. The research projects offered continue to reflect the range of challenges facing industry and cover areas such as: product development, tourism contributions to the local economy, and harnessing opportunities of the 2012 Olympics for local SME’s to name but a few.

Therefore, while realising a pedagogical gap, the paper has drawn upon literature from work-based learning and learning as emerging through complex adaptive systems in order to conceptualise the learning and teaching environment within which this mode of study can be situated. In doing so, three main conclusions can be drawn from the paper. First, ADs offer students the opportunity to learn *through* and *for* work. In providing students the opportunity to work directly with industry, students are able to reap the benefits of applied, effective learning. Such development arises as students heighten their awareness of their future career path; realising the opportunities for further establishing and asserting their professional identity and mobilising an ‘edge’ in “self promotion” (Martin). Furthermore, it was felt that experiential learning opens the possibility for enhancing students’ professionalism as they engage in ‘real life’ situations and become empowered within their learning. Secondly, the paper positions ADs as a mode of study that elevates learning through partnerships. Becoming situated as agents

in a knowledge generating system, students learn to adapt and cope as their learning environment and knowledge generation changes and evolves. The research environment as based in industry, becomes infiltrated with numerous agents, issues and problems that demands students become adaptive and flexible. As Railsback (2001) suggests, in such systems there are varying degrees of randomness and deterministic chaos and research will develop through, and in response to, the emergence of stimuli and observations. Thus, learning emerges through a dynamic triangulation of agents (student, supervisor and AD provider), that serves not to suppress students' voices, but rather provides opportunity for student creativity and innovation as they directly influence the direction of research by working in partnership. Research therefore emerges as a series of negotiations and knowledge sharing practices that reflect both the individual wants and needs of agents, but also produce collective landscapes of knowledge production. Finally, the paper proposes that ADs open further pathways to develop student reflexivity. Such reflexivity facilitates not only academic maturity, but also mobilises the professional and personal development of the individual as they develop as active agents of their own learning.

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AD Provider

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