

A15. Embedding sustainability in an international hospitality management resort audit assessment

Nadine Sulkowski and Tracy Jones

Hospitality management degree programmes date back to the early 1970s, originally in the form of hotel or catering management courses. Such applied management degree programmes cover many of the aspects of generic management, but with an industry-specific focus. Invariably such programmes are sandwich four-year programmes, incorporating a year long placement in the industry.

Back in the mid-nineties, at the University of Gloucestershire, 'environmental issues' were covered within hospitality management degree programmes (see for example, Roberts 1995). Most specifically an option module, *Environmental Issues in the Hospitality Industry*, was used as the main vehicle, with some coverage of related matters in other modules. Formally the method by which environmental issues were covered in the curriculum was reported to the University annually, as part of the annual course quality assurance reporting process (q.v. Morris and Mason-O'Connor).

In redesigning the University's hospitality programmes during 2002-3, sustainability started to be viewed in a broader sense, not labelled as 'environmental issues', but embedded into the learning outcomes of compulsory modules throughout all three levels of the degree programmes. In this respect 'sustainability' had moved from being a discrete coverage of 'environmental issues' to embedding social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability alongside other management components of the programme. Students would learn about and view sustainability as an integrated part of hospitality management education, not an added extra; sustainability had become part of the mainstream curriculum.

Whilst this case study focuses on a specific activity in the final level of the programme, examples of how sustainability is covered in earlier levels aids

the understanding of the specific activity and places it in the programme context.

At Level 1, students studying for the BA (Hons) in Hospitality Management and International Hospitality Management undertake a module, *Hospitality Service Operations*. One of the stated learning outcomes of this module is to: 'apply theories of sustainability to the management of hospitality operations'.

At Level 2 within the compulsory module, *International Hospitality Perspectives*, one of the stated learning outcomes is to: 'evaluate the importance and role of sustainability in international hospitality development and operations'. Moreover the compulsory module *Facilities Management* is shaped by the embedding of sustainability. One of the learning outcomes of this module is to: 'apply facilities management principles and techniques to the hospitality industry whilst considering principles of sustainability as well as profit maximisation'. At both levels sustainability forms part of the assessment, for example, *Facilities Management* includes a student-led seminar related to: 'the role of the facilities management function in developing environmentally-friendly operations within the context of the hospitality industry' and providing an opportunity of student-centred active learning in the applied subject area.

At Level 3, the compulsory module, *International Resort Management*, again covers sustainability throughout the taught programme and within an integrated assessment. The module considers strategic issues and planning in International Hospitality Management, organisational behaviour, ethics, and contemporary International Hospitality Management issues. Operational factors and the use of managerial reports are considered as a basis for effective decision-making. The module content summary specifically states: 'these [aspects] are considered within the context of sustainable international hospitality management'.

Aims

As a part of the *International Resort Management* module assessment, students are required to conduct a strategic analysis of an international resort of their choice. The aims of this assessment activity are for students to:

- Develop competence in assessing the impact of legislation and external dynamics on the increasing embedding of sustainability in strategic planning
- Develop an understanding of the environmental and socio-economic responsibility that international resorts have towards their host destinations
- Develop competence in applying principles of embedded sustainability to concept design, financial and operational planning, resourcing, and marketing, as well as the management of consumer behaviour.

Rationale

Rather than asking students to explore one specific form of sustainability (for example, environmental or financial sustainability), this assessment activity requires students to address the topic from an holistic perspective. Hence, the activity has been designed for students to:

- Integrate their learning from previous modules
- Recognise the potential for either synergy or conflict between socio-economic and environmental sustainability and sustainability from a financial and market perspective. This means that sustainability needs to be considered from a multi-dimensional perspective. Students should critically assess the extent to which sustainable practices in one area of business complement or compromise sustainability in other areas. For example, do environmentally sustainable practices lead to enhanced cost-efficiency or is long-term profitability compromised through such practices?

Within such an activity students are taking a 'real life' international resort and applying theory to a practical 'real life' case study. Such application develops students' critical thinking in an holistic way, as they need to reflect on a number of integrated and complex issues.

Implementation

Students are expected to select their own international resort for this case study activity, following tutor guidance. They conduct independent research in order to assess the business environment as well as the strategic position of their chosen resort. Weekly tutor-led workshops have been designed to support students in developing an understanding of how

principles of embedded sustainability are applied in the international resort business. During these sessions, sustainability is considered in relation to contemporary issues, resort planning and design, consumer psychology, business ethics, competitiveness, financial management, performance measurement and decision-making. Each week's session focuses on one of these aspects and students analyse the concepts taught in relation to their chosen case study resort. As the programme, the module and the assessment have a particular international focus it is raising awareness and understanding of sustainability in a wider international context.

One resort students have chosen to study is the Walt Disney Resort in Florida. Having implemented a state-of-the-art energy management program aimed at energy conservation and efficiency while minimizing costs and environmental concerns, the resort has been recognised as a role model to owners and administrators of public and private facilities (Allen 2006), thereby making it a very suitable case study within the context of this module. Another example could be resorts in southern Thailand, where the impact of the 2004 tsunami has led to significant redevelopment, with sustainability as an important factor (Garcia *et al.* 2006).

Yet another example resort would be Vilamoura in Portugal (Partidario 2003). This resort accounted for 40% of tourist demand in Portugal during 2003. It became a mass tourism resort in the 1960s, but has developed more sustainable practices since 1996 (Partidario 2003). Some of Vilamoura's awards since that time include: Green Globe Destination since 2000; ISO 14001 for its golf course and marina environmental management system (EMS) – the first resort in Europe to achieve these awards for its golf course and its marina; and it is recognised in the 'committed to green' programme by the European Golf Federation (Partidario 2003). All of these international resorts offer students the opportunity to consider wide-ranging issues, with social, economic and environmental impacts and initiatives to be considered from a sustainability perspective in each (Garcia *et al.* 2006; Partidario 2003).

Essentially the activity enables students to identify current issues and good practice, the rationale for practice observed, and how the findings may be used in future resort developments. The holistic approach ensures that students consider the many integrated aspects of the international resort management, as discussed earlier. This ensures students apply environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability. The nature of

the activity requires students to use their knowledge and understanding in an applied way, hence they develop their skills by application to a 'real life' situation.

Active learning

Independent learning activities which develop autonomous learners are documented in Dale and McCarthy's (2006) study which specifically reflects on hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism students' learning. The authors particularly reflect on hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism Level 3 students whom they see as adept at knowing what is required.

Dawe *et al.* (2005) particularly advocate experiential learning by relating sustainability theory to 'real-life' situations. This approach, which is adopted in this activity, is further explained as students 're-connecting with reality'. They also argue that with an holistic approach

Many of the skills and knowledge for sustainable development are associated with complex, multi-layered and interconnected systems. This approach [holistic] encompasses a more open-ended exploration of interdependency and interdisciplinary connections between subjects as well as including approaches to developing and honing critical thinking.

(Dawe *et al.* 2005: 5)

Thus, Dawe *et al.* characterise an holistic approach to sustainable development education as one that develops students as critical thinkers, who

are able to identify and analyse the broader societal, economic and environmental connections for the subject area and demonstrate respect and sensitivity for all subject areas.

(Dawe *et al.* 2005: 12)

Davis and Wilcock (2006) note that

the case study approach is one way in which such active learning strategies can be implemented

and that case studies allow students to

demonstrate theoretical concepts in an applied setting.

Case study based learning is used earlier in the programme and is something with which students are familiar as a learning vehicle.

In addition to the written assessment students may also improve their mark through *viva voce*. Such an addition could be an advantage particularly to international students or students with dyslexia, who might face particular challenges in expressing their knowledge solely in a written form.

Feedback

This is a new module, running for the first time in 2006/07. It runs in the last semester of a four-year international hospitality management degree programme. Formal feedback on the activity will be obtained through mid- and end of module evaluations. Previous modules in the programme show positive feedback to such applied assessments. Students express a preference for assessments that have a practical application, so they can understand theory in a practical industry-applied context. By the final year of the programme all students have completed a year long supervised work placement in the industry. Such real life experiences allow students to put learning into context and consider issues from different perspectives.

Strengths and weaknesses

The integrated nature of this assessment activity allows students in their final semester of study to reflect on previous knowledge and understanding and apply it to a real life situation. In doing so it is important to ensure students do not focus on one specific aspect of the case study, to the detriment of other elements; care needs to be taken to avoid this. The weekly focus on different aspects that build to make the case study assessment helps in this respect.

Programmes

The Level 3 Module is 15 CATS and compulsory on the BA (Hons) International Hospitality Management.

Key words:

International resort audit; case study assessment; integrated assessment; hospitality management; sustainability

References

Allen, P.J. (2006) How Disney Saves Energy (Hint: It's Not Magic), *Strategic Planning for Energy and the Environment*, 26(1), pp32-45.

Connell, J. (2006) *Assessment case study: understanding the development and implementation of sustainable tourism policies and practices in Scotland's first National Park*, [online], Available from: <<http://www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/cases/case83.html>> [Accessed 08/02/07].

Dale, C. and McCarthy, P. (2006), I like your style: Learning approaches of Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality students studying generic modules, *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 5(2). Available from: <<http://www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk/johlste/vol5no2/academic/0116.pdf>> [Accessed 08/02/07].

Davis, C. and Wilcock, E. (2006) *Teaching materials using case studies*, [online], Available from: <<http://www.materials.ac.uk/guides/casestudies.asp#why>> [Accessed 09/02/07].

Dawe, G., Jucker, R. and Martin, S. (2005) *Sustainable Development in Higher Education: Current Practice and Future Developments*, [online], York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from: <<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/misc/sustdevinHEfinalreport.pdf>> [Accessed 08/02/07].

Garcia, R., Siu-Yu, L., Chau, K.W., Kanitpun, R., Shimatsu, Y., Grunder, P., Koo, R. and Baharuddin (2006) Sustainable resorts: learning from the 2004 tsunami, *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 15(3), pp429-427.

Partidario, M.R. (2003) The Vilamoura Resort from mass tourism to sustainable destination, *Business Enterprise for Sustainable Travel (BEST)*, 4(2), [online], The Conference Board in association with the World Travel

and Tourism Council. Available from:
<http://www.sustainabletravel.org/docs/businessProfile_Vilamoura.pdf>
[Accessed 28/02/07].

Roberts, C. (1995) *Taking Responsibility: Promoting Sustainable Practice through Higher Education Curricula - Sport, Leisure, Hospitality and Tourism*, Department of the Environment with Worldwide Fund for Nature, London: Pluto Press.

Contacts:

Nadine Sulkowski
The Business School
University of Gloucestershire
The Park
Cheltenham
GL50 2RH
UK
+44 (0) 1242 714887
nsulkowski@glos.ac.uk

Tracy Jones
The Business School
University of Gloucestershire
The Park
Cheltenham
GL50 2RH
UK
+44 (0) 1242 714087
tjones@glos.ac.uk