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Poster Presentation

Lifelong Learning: The Potential Role of An Alumni Association.

Over the last 12 months the Hospitality subject team at Sheffield Hallam University have been engaged in the setting up of a Alumni network for Hospitality Graduates of Sheffield Hallam University. Sheffield Hallam University has been involved in Hospitality education at HND and Degree level for over 25 years. However although there has been a longstanding generic University Alumni association and informal contact with hospitality alumni, little attempt has been made to formalise these linkages.

The nature of Hospitality means that the relationship with our alumni can potentially feed into our teaching programmes. The importance of alumni is becoming increasingly recognised in the USA, "where in hospitality education alumni and industry support are important for mentoring, internships, and permanent placement of graduates" Assante (2005). The aims of the alumni programme clearly fitted into these well recognised benefits to an hospitality programme, however discussions with potentially alumni members led to the surprising discovery that although the potential members were engaged in demanding jobs, the aspect they missed most from University was the 'intellectual challenge'. A big draw to the alumni who attended an initial meeting of the alumni network with the Hospitality teaching team, was the possibility of reengaging with the intellectual challenge of University life. A mechanism that could achieve this was the proposal that University staff engage in academic research with alumni as full partners rather than using the alumni as subjects for research.

In this poster we report on the first research project, where a team of two lecturers and six alumni who are all currently employed in different roles in the hospitality industry, work together to create a working relationship that brings tangible benefits to all involved. The research project builds on research being undertaken at Sheffield Hallam University on location of hospitality enterprises. The project to date has involved the alumni in the development of a questionnaire to test a particular aspects of the Egan & Nield model of intra-urban location of hotels. The alumni were used firstly to pilot, then as a focus group to explore the key concepts and how the issue could be investigated by using a structured interview approach with managers in the hospitality industry. Currently the alumni members of the research team are undertaking the structured interviews using a snowball approach to sampling. The next stage is for the authors of this paper to do the initial analysis of the data. Then the intention is to meet as a group to agree the findings of the research in June and go for publication. In July we plan to present the findings to the Hospitality Alumni network and use this as a catalyst to recruit a wider membership for this research group allowing us to further test the model.

The initial response of the alumni has been very positive, with the alumni really engaging in the research process particularly as regards the development of the conceptual framework and its implication for industry practice. Thus the involvement in the research has allowed the alumni to continue their learning in an ongoing relationship with their University.

References

Assante, L, M. (2005). *Determining Quality Parameters as a Foundation for Effective Ranking of Hospitality Management Programs*. PhD, Graduate Faculty of Texas Tech University. Last accessed on 16 April 2007 at <http://dspace.lib.ttu.edu/handle/2346/1236>.

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