Assessing Students’ Perceptions of Their Cooperative Education Placements
In the Tourism Industry: International Perspective

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ABSTRACT

According to recent findings, students’ perceptions of the cooperative education placements could be measured in detail by using the concept of organisational social climate. This present study compared the students’ perceptions on an international level. Three universities offering cooperative education in their Bachelor of Tourism Management degrees participated in the study. The three groups of students were as follows: Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia, N=46; Fachhochschoole Muenchen, Germany, N=37; Sheffield Hallam University, U.K., N=60. Students’ perceptions of the social climate were assessed by using a Work Environment Scale (WES) that measures the following 10 social climate dimensions: involvement, peer cohesion, supervisor support, autonomy, task orientation, work pressure, clarity, control, innovation and physical comfort. The data was obtained on three occasions: before placements-expected social climate; during placements-realistic perceptions of the social climate; and after placements-ideal preferences for the social climate of the placement organisations. The results indicated that there are differences between the three occasions for each institution and between the three international institutions in terms of the students’ perceptions of their cooperative education placements’ social climate. These differences highlight the need for both, educational institutions and industry management internationally to improve social climate of the placement organisations.

Key words: cooperative education work environment tourism industry student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the findings based on three international samples of students about their perceptions of the cooperative education placements work environment in tourism industry. The main aim of this study was to compare results from an earlier study done in Melbourne (Waryszak, 1997) with those from overseas institutions.

The results accumulated from various studies to date point to the many benefits of cooperative education such as students’ improved self-confidence, self-concept and improved social skills (Gillin, Davie and Beissel, 1984; Wilson, 1974), gains in practical knowledge and skills (Williams et al, 1993), enhanced employment opportunities (Clark, 1994; Sharma, Mannel and Rowe, 1995). There is, however, little evidence about these students’ perceptions of their cooperative education placements with regard to specific aspects of the job and the organisation. The placement of students in various organisations as trainees is an academic requirement to foster the work experience so the students will attain the necessary skills to supplement their theoretical training (King, 1994).

Work experience gained through cooperative education placements can help in the induction process so that tourism organisations may be better able to retain their employees and foster their performance. It is important, therefore, to both educational institutions and industry, that students have realistic perceptions of their prospective entry to these organisations. If educators and employers know how students perceive their organisational placements environment, they can better prepare the students and organisational processes for successful entry to the labour force.

The main aim of this present study was to compare the Melbourne Tourism Management students’ perceptions with the perceptions of students from other international institutions. This international comparison would help to ascertain the similarities and differences in perceptions of cooperative education placements. The similarities would indicate that the Melbourne students’ perceptions are not unique, and that the studied aspects of the work environment of the tourism organisations need to be addressed based on an international perspective of cooperative education common to this industry. The differences in perceptions would point to the educators and the industry management that there is a need to address the preparation of students for work experience relating it specifically to each placement.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are few studies to date concerning student views about their cooperative education. In one of a very few studies addressing students’ expectations in the hos-
pitality and tourism area, Casado (1992) attempted to identify some of the basic expectations of students being recruited by hospitality organisations. He found that students had “fairly realistic” expectations before they graduated. Most students expected to be successful in seeking employment as trainee managers. He concluded that, although the students’ expectations were realistic, the turnover of these students in the hospitality industry seems to be high. There is a probability that recruiting organisations might create false expectations and/or lack adequate induction programs.

In another study, Barron and Maxwell (1993) surveyed three groups of students: first year hospitality management course students; students returned from their cooperative education placements to complete the course and newly graduated employees from the same academic institution. They found that overall, first year students held positive views of their future placement organisations, such as that the hospitality industry offers career opportunities, the prospect of training, financial rewards, and job satisfaction. However, the students returning from their cooperative education placements held generally negative views in all these areas. Newly graduated employees showed the same negative views as the post-placement students. The authors concluded that the difference between students’ expectations and experience of the industry could be attributed not only to the educational institutions’ socialisation methods, but also to the way the industry structures the induction programs, and attempts to socialise newly recruited employees.

Purcell and Quinn (1995) surveyed 704 former students who had completed various hospitality degree courses. Their results confirmed earlier studies’ findings that graduates complained of having little opportunity to develop managerial skills. However, the researchers state, that the cooperative education code of practice asserts “that one of the main purposes of Work Experience is ‘to enable industry to demonstrate the career potential that is available’, which involves providing appropriate management learning opportunities and enabling students to obtain insight into the management and supervision skills and knowledge they will require in their intended careers” (p.11).

The studies just reviewed point to the importance of cooperation between educational institutions and industry in the work experience process of students. However, the studies’ criteria of how students perceive their cooperative education placements lack definitional uniformity and conceptual conciseness. The author of this study considered the social climate of the organisational work environment, as defined by Moos (1994) to be most relevant in the detailed assessment of students’ cooperative education experience before, during and after their placements in service industries. Moos conceptualised the work environment as a dynamic system composed of four domains: physical features, organisational structures and their policies, suprapersonal and task factors, and the social climate of organisations. The influence of human behaviour in the first three domains eventuates from the social climate these domains create. He further operationalised the organisational social climate in terms of specific dimensions under three sets: relationship dimensions (employees’ involvement, coworker cohesion and supervisor support), personal growth and goal orientation dimensions (autonomy on the job, task orientation and work pressure) and system maintenance and change dimensions (clarity of rules and policies, managerial control, innovation and physical comfort). The employees’ morale, motivation, performance and well being can be influenced by the social climate within these work environment domains. Likewise, the students’ perceptions of their placements’ social climate can influence their decisions about future career orientation (Barron and Maxwell, 1993; Purcell and Quinn, 1995).

According to Moos (1974) “…some social environments are more supportive than others…some are extremely rigid, autocratic, and controlling…many social environments emphasise order, clarity, and organisation…and have overall programs which regulate and direct the behaviour of the people within them” (p.9). He further asserts that the social climate of a work environment can have a strong influence on people working in it. Specifically, “it can have an impact on an individual’s morale and well-being, aspirations and achievement, self-understanding, impulse control and so on” (Moos 1987, p.2). Therefore, the understanding of the social climate of the work environment of students through its assessment can give educational institutions and the industry alike insight into students’ expectations from the work environment they will be exposed to, and can be a valuable resource for helping these students in the work experience process.

RATIONAL FOR THE STUDY
In this present study, Moos’s concept was utilised by assessing perceptions of work environment of students studying in Tourism Management degrees in three international institutions. This study is similar to the previous study (Waryszak, 1997) in which perceptions were assessed of the students studying in the following courses: Catering and Hotel Management, Travel And Tourism Management, Accountancy, Banking and Finance, Information Technology, Retail Management, and International Trade for the Bachelor of Business Degrees in the Faculty of Business at Victoria University of Technology. The students were eligible for cooperative education placements in 1993-1994. The students completed the Work Environment Scale (WES) (Moos 1986). In all, 209 students responded to a mail questionnaire before, during and after their cooperative education placements. Overall, the students had moderate to high perceptions of their organisations’ work environment. Specifically, all students expected other employees to be friendly and supportive of one another, to be concerned about and committed to their job; emphasising good planning, efficiency, and getting the job done; and perceived their physical surroundings to contribute to a pleasant work environment. On the other hand, the students perceived their supervisors to use rules and pressures to keep employees under control and to be less supportive. They also
perceived their jobs to be low on variety, change and new approaches, and having less clarity as to daily routine and how explicitly rules and policies are communicated. The findings just described indicate that students’ perceptions of cooperative education placements can be assessed in detail. However, they could not be generalised beyond the sample studied.

This present study, therefore, was undertaken to compare Victoria University of Technology students’ perceptions of cooperative education placements with those from international institutions. Only the Tourism Management students’ perceptions were compared, because the international sample also consisted of students studying a similar course. The present study set out to fulfil the following objectives:

• To assess in detailed and uniform way students’ perceptions of work environment of their placements.
• To compare the Victoria University students’ perceptions with those undertaking tourism courses in international institutions.
• To find out which aspects of the work environment of the tourism organisations need to be addressed in preparing students for work experience in the tourism industry based on an international perspective.

METHOD

Subjects

Three groups of students from the following institutions participated in the survey: Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, N=46; Fachhochschule Muenchen, Germany, N=37; Sheffield Hallam University, U.K., N=60. The author secured collaboration with these institutions during his Outside Study Programme visit to Europe. The three institutions were similar in terms of the courses’ curriculum and the duration of cooperative education placements (up to 12 months). The data was obtained by mail and in person from the students studying in their second year of the tourism management degrees. All students eligible for cooperative education placements during 1994 for Melbourne students, and during 1996 for the other two samples, completed the questionnaire on the first occasion. Final response rate and gender and age characteristics are shown in Table 1. There were no significant gender and age differences between respondents and non-respondents in the three samples.

Instrument

The Work Environment Scale (WES) was used (Moos, 1994). WES-E (Expected) measures students’ expectations from their future placements. WES-R (Real) measures students’ actual perceptions during placements. WES-I (Ideal) measures the social climate of the placements the students would ‘ideally’ like to encounter. The scale comprises 90 items grouped into 10 subscales that measure the perceptions of the social climate of different aspects of organisational work settings. They are: Involvement, Peer Cohesion, and Supervisor-Support grouped under the domain of Relationship Dimensions; Autonomy, Task Orientation and Work Pressure grouped under the domain of Personal Growth Dimensions; and Clarity, Control, Innovation and Physical Comfort grouped under the domain of System Maintenance and System Change Dimensions (see Table 2 on page 4). Each subscale in turn, is composed of nine items, and the responses to each item are either true or false. The WES psychometric properties such as reliability and validity are well established (Moos 1994). The WES was double-translated into the German language for the German sample.

RESULTS

Statistical analysis was performed at two levels:

1. Assessing the differences between the three occasions for each sample. That is, do the students’ perceptions of the social climate before their placements differ from the perceptions during and after the placements?

2. Comparing the three samples on each of the three occasions. That is, are there differences between the three international samples for the three occasions?

Differences between expected, real and ideal social climate for each sample

ANOVA Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was used (Norusis, 1992). This statistical analysis allows for measuring the differences on three occasions for each WES subscale score provided by the same
students. As can be seen in Table 3 on page 5, generally the students in the three samples scored highly on the third (Ideal) occasion as compared to Expected or Real. That is, the students preferred quite different social climate to that which they encountered on their placements. The Scheffe Test for Multiple Comparisons between subscales was used to find out about specific statistically significant differences between the means for the three occasions (Winer, Brown and Michaels, 1991). For Melbourne sample there were statistically significant differences between the three occasions on all the WES subscales except Task Orientation. They have had ideally much higher preferences for the social climate as compared to what they expected and what they actually encountered. For Muenchen sample, on the other hand, there were only two statistically significant differences in Peer Cohesion and Control. That is the Muenchen students would have liked more peer cohesion and less control on the job as compared with their expectations and actual perceptions. Sheffield students ideally preferred more peer cohesion, more supervisor support, and greater consideration for their innovative ideas. They, however, expected much more control then they actually encountered on the job.

Differences between the three samples for each occasion

ONEWAY Analysis of Variance (Norusis, 1992) was used to assess the differences between the three samples for each occasion. This statistical analysis allows for measuring the differences between mean scores for more than two groups on each WES subscale score. As can be seen in Table 4, there were statistically significant differences between the three samples on six out of ten WES subscales. Figures 1, 2 and 3 graphically illustrate the differences on each WES subscale for each sample. The Scheffe Test for Multiple Comparisons (Winer, Brown and Michaels, 1991) between subscales was used to determine specific statistically significant differences between the means for the three samples. As can be seen in Figure 1 on page 7 (WES-Expected) five of the ten subscales recorded significantly different scores for the three samples. Melbourne students expected the management to be less supportive of employees than did the Sheffield students. They also expected more work pressure then Muenchen students. Muenchen students in turn, expected much less peer cohesion at their placements than Sheffield students, less work pressure then Melbourne students, much less control than Melbourne and Sheffield students, and more encouragement and freedom in variety, change and using new approaches on the job.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WES subscales and descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Coworker Cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Supervisor Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth Dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Task Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Work Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Maintenance and Change Dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Managerial Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Physical Comfort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Moos (1994)
Figure 2 on page 7 illustrates the differences between the three samples for the actual (WES-Real) student perceptions of the social climate. The samples differed only in two areas. Melbourne students encountered much more pressure at work than the other two samples. Muenchen students perceived management significantly less controlling than did the Melbourne and Sheffield students.

According to Figure 3 on page 8, the differences between the three samples lie in four areas of the WES-Ideal scale. Muenchen students ideally preferred less peer cohesion, less task orientation, less control and surprisingly preferred lower physical comfort as compared to the other two samples. However, as Figure 3 illustrates, preferences in Control and Physical Comfort subscales were statistically different for each sample.

In short, the results indicate that there are generally significant differences between what students expect, actually encounter and ideally prefer of their placements. This is specifically evident in the following areas: Peer Cohesion, Supervisor Support, Control, and Innovation. Also, differences are evident between the three international samples in the areas of Peer Cohesion, Supervisor Support, Task orientation, Work Pressure, Control, Innovation and Physical Comfort. This indicates that social climate of the placements' work environment should be generally assessed and interpreted differently for different student groups.

**DISCUSSION**

The first aim of this study was to assess Melbourne and international students’ detailed perceptions of the cooperative education placements on international level. Although the perceptions of social climate on three occasions by students in the three international institutions was uniform overall, their perceptions of the work environment varied across specific social climate dimensions. These findings indicate detailed information about students’ perceptions of their cooperative education placements in industry. Unlike the various findings of the studies reviewed earlier, the results of this study indicate specific aspects of differences in perceptions. Some scores, notably in the Supervisor Support, Work Pressure, Control, and Innovation dimensions were more prominent than in other dimensions. Previous studies, although less detailed, point to similar conclusions. Knutson (1989) and Charles (1992) for example, found that hospitality and tourism students are concerned with the issues associated with working in these industries, such as lack of challenge and lack of management involvement. It is safe to suggest, therefore, following Pavesic & Brymer (1990) and Sarabakhsh, Carson & Lindgren (1989) that students’ expectations of industry may affect their actual perception of the industry after their graduation. This in turn can affect their work satisfaction and successful professional development.

The second aim of this study was to find out if the Melbourne students’ perceptions differed from perceptions of students from other participating institutions. In general, as can be observed from Figures 1, 2 and 3, the Melbourne students’ perceptions did differ from other students in a few areas of the work environment. This could be attributed to a few factors. Firstly, the three international samples’ scores could be a reflection of the different perception of the social climate of the work environment of their placements due to the different organisational socialisation processes as pointed out by Dean (1983). Although, the three samples were matched on the course curriculum content and the timing of the cooperative education experience, there could be some differences in curriculum delivery especially in student orientation and preparation before placements occurred. Secondly, there could be cultural differences between the students. The values attached to organisational socialisation in general could differ.

The third aim of this study was to find out which aspects of the work environment of the tourism organisations need to be addressed in preparing students for work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WES Dimensions</th>
<th>Melbourne</th>
<th>Muenchen</th>
<th>Sheffield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>4.23*</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Cohesion</td>
<td>5.22*</td>
<td>5.47*</td>
<td>5.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Support</td>
<td>8.15*</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>7.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>7.93*</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
<td>2.49*</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Pressure</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Maintenance and System Change Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>6.99*</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>10.37*</td>
<td>3.38*</td>
<td>3.49*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>10.94*</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>7.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Comfort</td>
<td>5.73*</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*ANOVA repeated measures analysis of variance with p<.001 (Norusis, 1992)
experience. The students in the three samples similarly scored the four work environment dimensions discussed before (peer cohesion, lack of supervisor support, high work pressure, high control and lack of innovation) over the three occasions. They highlight the need for both educational institutions and industry management internationally to address the following issues:

(a) Improving managerial support may include an increase in communication between cooperative education placement officers and supervisors responsible for students during their placements. Development of clear policies which could guide students before placements and monitoring of these policies during placements could eventuate in more supervisory support.

(b) Reducing excessive work demands and time pressure. The tourism industry is very labour-intensive and is perceived as demanding. Students could be briefed on the specific demands. Their placements would perhaps consist of progressively more demanding tasks, beginning with the tasks that are realistically attainable by students during the early stages of their placements.

(c) Altering managerial control mechanisms such as rules and procedures during student placements. Managerial control mechanisms need to be applied with a greater degree of flexibility. Greater student participation in decision-making, especially in utilising their enthusiastic approaches to problem solving learned during academic year, may result in students having more positive perception of supervisory control.

(d) Greater opportunities might be provided to students in terms of variety, change and the encouragement of new ideas and personal growth. Students value variety and change during their placements. The organisations offering placements should ensure that task variety and enlargement is an integral part of their program. Cooperative education placements should not only be a skill learning experience but should also provide students an environment in which they can be involved in the generation of new ideas and which fosters personal growth.

Despite the similarities and differences between students’ expectations at the international level, the question arises if these expectations will be met while the students are on their placements, or are students’ expectations unrealistic? If they are not met then, as evidence of this study indicates and as evidence by Barron and Maxwell (1993), West and Jameson (1990) and Purcell and Quinn (1995) suggests, the students may still be discouraged from entering their chosen professions after graduation. Therefore, the cooperative education experience may be a crucial factor for students in making this decision.

In short, the findings just described show that students’ perceptions of cooperative education can be assessed in detail by measuring their perceptions of the social climate of their industrial placements’ work environment. The most noticeable aspect of the findings was that on an international level all students perceive a lack of support, high work pressure, high managerial control and lack of opportunities for involvement. As Purcell and Quinn (1995) noted, the students returned from placements “…to their course more mature, with considerable insight into the industry; but this insight often crystallised in disillusion and a desire to use their experience and education to find employment in another sector of the economy” (p.16). The assessment of the students’ perceptions, therefore, may help in predicting their subsequent career orientation in hospitality industries and elsewhere.

| Table 4 |

Differences between the three international samples on the three occasions of work environment perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WES Dimensions</th>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>Real</th>
<th>Ideal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Cohesion</td>
<td>4.52*Mn, S</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>8.19*Mn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Support</td>
<td>4.21*M,S</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>4.95*Mn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Pressure</td>
<td>4.80*M,Mn</td>
<td>7.06*M,Mn,S</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Maintenance And System Change Dimensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>11.83*M,Mn,S</td>
<td>9.42*M,Mn,S</td>
<td>12.34* M,Mn,S*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>4.03*M,Mn</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Comfort</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>12.36*M,Mn,S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ONE-WAY ANOVA and Sheffe Test with p<.05 (Norusis, 1992)
M=Melbourne
Mn=Muenchen
S=Sheffield
Figure 1
WES—Expected differences between the three samples

![Graph showing expected differences between samples for various factors]

Figure 2
WES—Realistic differences between the three samples

![Graph showing realistic differences between samples for various factors]
CONCLUSION

While the results of the present study point to many similarities and differences between international samples, they cannot be generalised beyond the samples studied. The samples were drawn from three institutions, and although they incorporated three similar courses of study, the research needs replication with varied populations and institutions. For example, data comparisons should be done based on the USA samples, since there is also close cooperation between the USA institutions and the Victoria University of Technology. Although international cross-sectional research is complex, costly and difficult to execute, this study suggests some directions for meaningful exploration of the role of students' own perception of cooperative education. As Linke (1988) pointed out "...there is no ideal structure and very little evaluative information exists to indicate clearly the practical advantages and limitations between alternative approaches with respect to the multiple outcomes expected of students, employers and staff" (p.30). Therefore, further longitudinal and cross-sectional research is required to assess and compare the perceptions of the work environment of various academic institutions and employers in industry. Also, there is a need not only to compare various student populations to one another over time, but also to find out if those students who stayed with the chosen industry after graduation were also the same students whose cooperative education expectations were met by subsequent experience in industry.

REFERENCES


![Figure 3](image-url)


