



Tourism Education as a Way to Create Value for the Industry: an Example from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

Ivan Berazhny, Alexandre Kostov,

¹International Business and Tourism, ²Tourism and Hospitality;
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Finland)

ivan.berazhny@haaga-helia.fi, alexandre.kostov@haaga-helia.fi

Abstract

The paper will report about a recent initiative by the authors (Haaga-Helia's staff on Porvoo Campus) to use thesis seminar groups as a form of project work commissioned by one of the world's leading IT solution providers in the travel and tourism industry.

The paper will outline how such cooperation can be initiated, conceptualised, planned, and implemented, based on the competences in sales and services that have been extensively integrated by Haaga-Helia across its curricula with successful impacts on the work of the staff and on the students' learning.

The paper will show how a thesis seminar group became the optimal form for the students and the staff to create and deliver value for the commissioner, which resulted in new insights into the commissioner's operational environment, new ideas on how to advance digital distribution of the commissioner's products, and new employment opportunities for the students.

The paper will also reflect on how complex and challenging the process of securing and implementing such a commission can be and what university staff could do in adjusting their work practices so that the industry would see the students as partners and enablers of innovation.

1. Introduction

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences [1] has a strong focus on including cooperation with worklife into the studies. On Porvoo Campus, one industry of choice for international students is the travel and tourism industry, and many tourism courses are designed to add value to Haaga-Helia's partners across the industry. For the most part, the cooperation with the travel and tourism industry has been implemented by the first and second level students in their semester projects. Additionally, the third level students contribute to such cooperation by individual internships and thesis projects.

One challenge of the above cooperation is that the industry's stakeholders may see the first and second level students as insufficiently trained for the companies' core developmental work, while the third level individual thesis projects may be too small in their scopes (15 credits) to accommodate the activities worthy of a commission.

The authors of this paper noticed such challenges in cooperation with one potential commissioner (hereby referred to as the commissioner due to a non-disclosure agreement), who would consistently remain the core supplier of competences to the degree programmes in tourism on Porvoo Campus, yet still elusive in terms of commissioning a research or developmental project to the students. Yet in 2012, with a focus on selling the idea of a student-based project to the commissioner, the authors decided to identify and implement the optimal form of such cooperation and foster a new closer type of relationship with the company in question.

The first steps included a visit of students to the commissioner's headquarters, which strengthened the commissioner's interest in students. In 2014, the commissioner authorised a certificate-based training for students, whereby a discussion followed on how such certified students could become engaged in a project work for the commissioner. Following the discussions with degree programme directors and the commissioner's managers, the cooperation between the students and the commissioner finally took form as a research conducted by a thesis seminar group that contributed to the commissioner's developmental work.

Such cooperation, launched in the autumn 2014, became possible not in the least due to the adherence by Haaga-Helia staff and students to the principles of sales and service design, advocated by Haaga-Helia in training modules and sales and services clinics. With such training, industry partners are seen as customers and the cooperation is conceptualised via notions of customer journey, customer relationship management, customer's value chain, key account management plan,



etc. This paper, accordingly, highlights how relying on principles of sales and service design made the cooperation between tourism students and the commissioner productive.

2. The parties in cooperation

This section will highlight the commissioner's business and where Haaga-Helia's team can create an added value.

2.1 The commissioner

The commissioner is a global provider of IT solutions for the travel and tourism industry, and controls a large share of how travel products are distributed to intermediaries and the end users (business and leisure travellers). The commissioner's business model is based on transaction fees (a fixed fee for a reservation transaction that it charges suppliers of travel products that are distributed via its distribution platforms). Additionally, the commissioner provides business IT solutions to its customers to manage inventories, etc. The commissioner's customers include airlines, car rental companies, hotels, tour operators, travel agencies, insurance companies, ferry companies, rail operators, etc.

2.2 Haaga-Helia's team

To implement cooperation with the commissioner, Haaga-Helia's internal team included four staff members and five students. The staff members included the authors of this paper, both senior lecturers, and their respective supervisors, i.e. degree programme directors. The lecturers contributed their competences in travel and tourism technology, thesis supervision, research methods, and organisational communication. The directors enabled the resources, institutional framework, and additional contacts with the commissioner. The students were Haaga-Helia's international students from tourism degree programme, who have studied successfully the subjects that relate to the commissioner's field of expertise and went through a certified training.

2.3 The need for cooperation

Recent changes in the travel and tourism industry prompted the commissioner to develop new distribution platforms, that allow the suppliers of travel products to be more in control of what and how is marketed and sold via the commissioner's channels. The commissioner also launched new interfaces that target the end-users (business and leisure travellers) directly, bypassing wholesale and retail intermediaries. While such initiatives bring more value to the commissioner's customers, introducing such changes requires research insights, i.e. the activities where Haaga-Helia students can be valid.

3. The objectives of cooperation

This section will list both short-term and long-term goals that Haaga-Helia's team identified for the cooperation with the commissioner.

3.1 Short-term goals

The short-term goals that Haaga-Helia team set for October 2014 – April 2015 included 1) raising Haaga-Helia's brand awareness with the commissioner; 2) enabling the students to complete their thesis projects for the commissioner; 3) strengthening trust and mutual understanding between Haaga-Helia and the commissioner. Additionally, the students hoped to join the commissioner's industry events and to get access to the commissioner's inside training.

3.2 Long-term goals

The long-term goals that the cooperation between Haaga-Helia and the commissioner could reach included the following: 1) securing the commissioner's interest in future thesis projects; 2) securing a commission for a semester project for a larger group of students; 3) getting access to the latest products and training from the commissioner for Haaga-Helia students and staff; 4) arranging work placement for Haaga-Helia students on commissioner's premises; 5) arranging work rotation periods for Haaga-Helia staff with the commissioner; 6) arranging visits for Haaga-Helia students to the premises of the commissioner in Finland and in Europe.

4. The format of cooperation

This section will specify how the cooperation has been implemented within the framework of sales and services approach practiced by Haaga-Helia.



4.1 Account management plan

Once the short-term and the long-term goals of the cooperation were identified, the authors wrote an account management plan that captured the cooperation process with the commissioner in terms of sales terminology. The commissioner was conceptualised as a customer and all touch points with Haaga-Helia were visualised as points of customer service during the customer journey. Haaga-Helia's team and its communication with the commissioner were also visualised (see Fig. 1 below). An action plan with realistic timetables and allocation of resources was suggested.

4.2 Value proposition

Based on the commissioner's needs (section 2.3), five thesis projects were commissioned under one umbrella topic. The five students identified their respective sub-topics and wrote their thesis subject analyses, which were accepted both by Haaga-Helia thesis board and by the commissioner. The research focused on the following: 1) how to motivate intermediaries (leisure and corporate travel agents) to sell core travel products and ancillary services via the commissioner's distribution platforms; 2) how to facilitate and increase the consumption of ancillary services by the end users (business and leisure travellers, especially generation Y travellers); 3) how important are transparency and comparability of ancillary services for the end users, and 4) what are the tendencies in distribution of ancillary services via suppliers' own distribution platforms.

The students shared the research questions and collected data via interviews and surveys. The value was seen in bringing the results to the commissioner as a single information package with suggestions on how to advance the distribution and sales of ancillary services in the researched markets.

Additionally, the students planned to share a video about the work on commissioner's corporate blog.

4.3 Communication plan

The communication plan was organised as follows. The lecturers would communicate with the commissioner via email/phone. The lecturers would also send updates to the commissioner and degree programme directors. Haaga-Helia team would communicate internally via email/phone and via Haaga-Helia's SharePoint platform, where the commissioners would be present as guests, while the students would get full student rights. Additionally, the students could contact the commissioner, provided there is a need for direct communication (subject to approval by the lecturers). The commissioner was also welcome to pursue communication with any member of Haaga-Helia team. The students committed to use social media only to schedule meetings without disclosing the nature of the work. Thesis seminars, meetings with the commissioner, and research activities were documented according to Haaga-Helia's guidelines.

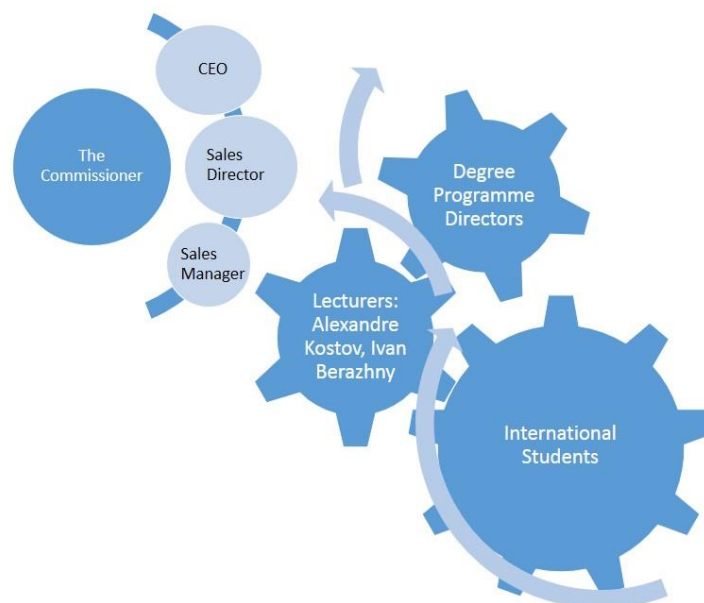


Fig. 1. Cooperation parties



4.4 Resources

The resources for the thesis seminar group were allocated as follows. Alexandre Kostov, the core supervisor, received 70 hours for the supervision and support of the students' thesis work. Ivan Berazhny would support the students' thesis work as part of his tutoring of the students. Each student has 15 study credits of thesis work to complete through cooperation with the commissioner, which amounts to 405 hours of study/work for each student. Thus, the team members have shared the pool of more than 2000 study/work hours to bring added value to the commissioner. Degree programme directors also followed the project and provided their coordination input when needed. The team also had resources for meetings with the commissioner. The students' work has also been supported by the necessary equipment and IT solutions provided by Haaga-Helia and, whenever possible, by the commissioner.

6. Results of cooperation

This section will highlight several results from the cooperation between Haaga-Helia and the commissioner at the moment when this paper is about to be submitted.

6.1 Opportunities for Haaga-Helia

Haaga-Helia students and staff have enjoyed many opportunities during the cooperation with the commissioner. The students and staff took part in several industry events and a virtual training seminar (available by invitation only) organised by the commissioner. The commissioner and Haaga-Helia identified more clearly the areas of cooperation while the research projects brought forward relevant knowledge about the developments in the industry. The students have gained job leads and expanded their professional networks. One student has an opportunity of a work placement with the commissioner. Similarly, Haaga-Helia staff have now a closer relationship with the commissioner whereby similar projects in the future can be easier. At the moment of writing, all short-term goals seem reachable. The majority of long-term goals also look feasible. The most rewarding realisation is that the project can lead towards establishing a strategic cooperation between the parties.

6.2 Commissioner's feedback

At the moment of submitting this paper, only two students have approached the completion of their thesis projects, while the remaining students aim at finalising their work in April 2015. This explains why the authors will share cumulative results of the project later, during the conference. At the same time, the commissioner has followed work and gave highly positive feedback. The results delivered so far include valuable insights into what prevents intermediaries to push ancillary services to the end users and what could motivate intermediaries to achieve better sales of ancillary services. The results also give insights into purchasing behaviours, corporate travel policies, and own distribution channels of the commissioner's suppliers. The students have also scripted the video and have started the information package for the commissioner that will include an executive summary, an infographic, and presentation slides. The commissioner has also expressed readiness to engage the students further, perhaps to develop training modules.

7. Conclusion

The pedagogical achievements of such cooperation are very encouraging. The authors demonstrated that a thesis seminar group with several students can share one commissioner. The authors also proved that the commissioned theses benefit from the principles of sales and service design. The authors were also happy to see that continuous development of students (from specific courses to certified training) resulted in great opportunities for the staff and the students.

Such cooperation naturally has challenges. The students need guidance, the commissioner requires non-disclosure, and the work easily exceeds the allocated resources. Yet seeing that our tourism students can create added value for the industry's leading stakeholder is priceless.



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References

- [1] www.haaga-helia.fi