

**CAPITALISING ON THE OLYMPICS FOR THE BENEFIT OF HOSPITALITY AND
TOURISM STUDENTS – A CASE STUDY ON PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC
AND PRIVATE SECTORS**

Ian Bikerstaff,

University of Ulster,

Email: id.bickerstaff@ulster.ac.uk

Abstract

The hosting of the London 2012 Olympics has provided educationalists with a rich source of materials that can benefit the learning experience of students, especially in Hospitality and Tourism.

“In 2012 the spotlight of the world will be on the UK as we host the biggest ever Olympic Games. The Olympics is about so much more than a few weeks of spectacular sport and I know the UK Business Schools have been working hard behind the scenes to get the most from this unique opportunity” Minister for The Olympics the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP 2010, ABS Media Bulletin 20.

This paper disseminates the outcomes of a project aimed at final-year Hospitality and Tourism students studying a module entitled ‘The Business Plan’. This module requires students to research a possible economic opportunity and put in place a realistic business plan in order to assess its feasibility. This project used the existing module and asked students to assess a business opportunity that was related to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The project’s structure provided support for the students in developing their business plans. In addition to students being mentored by academic staff throughout the module, a workshop/mentoring event was organised, which was attended by appropriate industry representatives.

As well as being assessed through the usual university channels, the project culminated in a Dragons’-Den-style event. Students pitched their business plan to a panel of “Dragons” – appropriate representatives from government/business/tourism and hospitality sector, and there was an Olympic-themed prize for the best pitch. This project was supported throughout by the Department of Culture, Art and Leisure, Northern Ireland, and was awarded the Olympic Inspire Mark.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games present a number of unique opportunities, not least in the areas of hospitality and tourism. Although the most obvious benefits will be realized by those competing in the games and the support teams for these athletes, it is generally accepted that the hosting of such an event can attract tourists after the event has finished. There will also be many spin off's associated with the main event. In order to host such an event, a country needs to develop its infrastructures including the development of transport networks, and improvements in its tourist accommodation. These things can have a positive long – term impact on a country long after the athletes have gone.

The Opportunity

Recent Olympic Games have provided host countries with opportunities that could not have been realised without the associated publicity surrounding the event. It is estimated that Sydney 2000 was watched by an international television audience of 3.7 billion people, providing Australia with a huge platform on which to promote 'Brand Australia'. It was estimated that this publicity was worth up to \$6.1 billion (US\$4.2 billion/€3.5 billion/£2.4 billion). Tourism Australia have suggested that up to 88% (97,680 people) of the 111,000 sports tourists who travelled to the 2000 Olympics were likely to visit the country again. A separate survey conducted in Japan revealed that the Games had heightened awareness within its country of the merits of Australia as a tourist destination, with 60% of respondents reporting that they knew more about the country as a direct result of the Olympics. A further 75% claimed that the event had increased their interest in travelling to Australia. In fact, the aggressive marketing campaign that accompanied the

Olympics provided Australia with so much positive exposure that 2000 was a record year for tourism with 4.931 million international arrivals. Tourism was not the only big winner, though, with retail sales in tourist areas increasing by up to 80% with an estimated net increase of \$164 million (US\$114 million/€94 million/£64 million) in the month of September. (Mintel 2004)

The Olympic Games held in Greece in 2004 showed similar trends. Airport managers reported that passenger traffic at the airport rose by 33% in August 2004 compared to the same month in 2003, with passenger numbers reaching 2 million. The number of aircraft using the airport during the Olympic months also rose to 20,600, representing an increase of 17% on August 2003 figures. (Mintel 2004)

The UK's tourist industry could be given a £3 billion boost by the London 2012 Olympic Games, according to a report by hotel chain Travelodge. The UK could outperform global tourism growth by 50 per cent in the four years before and after the 2012 Olympic Games, according to the report, with a potential extra 6.6 million visitors to the country between 2007 and 2016, generating the extra revenue. (Cited in Journal of Sports & Tourism, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/14775085.html>)

However, the European Tour Operators Association (ETOA) believes that London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games might actually harm tourism. In a 2009 report that analysed six Olympic Summer Games, the ETOA stated that Beijing experienced a 30% downturn in international tourists over the summer, when compared to Spring 2008 figures. Applying such a scenario to London would see a potential 2.5m drop in tourists visiting London, which would be accompanied by a £1.5bn fall in revenue. (Cited in Journal of Sports & Tourism, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/14775085.html>)

London 2012

If we accept that any potential decreases in actual tourism will be temporary and restricted to the actual games period, and that long economic benefits of hosting The Olympic Games will arise, it is imperative that full consideration is given to ensuring that these opportunities are fully

capitalised upon. The hosting of the London 2012 games provides the United Kingdom with many opportunities, not just in terms of the period of time when the games take place, but also in the run-up to the event and the lasting legacy that it is hoped will be left.

The Hospitality and Tourism Industries are in a great position to capitalize on such opportunities due to the nature of their activities. However, in order to fully achieve this, action needs to take place now. As highlighted on the 2012 web page, the clock is ticking down, and if the London Olympics are to be successful and “leave a key legacy of national benefits in culture, sport, volunteering, business and tourism”, plans need to be made and implemented now. (<http://www.london2012.com/indexb.php>) This is further supported by The Higher Education Academy (HEA), who claims that the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) networks subject areas “can therefore rightly claim to be the subjects for the Olympics” (www.heacademy.ac.uk/learninglegacies).

Some would suggest that the economic benefits will be disproportionately distributed, with London itself being the only benefactor. This is not the case, as many events will be held across the United Kingdom, each requiring its own support networks. Additionally, many teams will require facilities and accommodation for acclimatization.

Northern Ireland’s Role

Northern Ireland’s geographical positioning makes it an ideal location for such activities, being only a short distance from the main events. Experiences from past Olympic events have shown that areas that are geographically accessible to the epicentre can benefit greatly. These benefits are not only restricted to economic prosperity, but other rewards can also be gained such as building communities through volunteering, and ensuring that sustainability is achieved.

The Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the University of Ulster is in a unique position to help put in place some of the infrastructure that will be required if Northern Ireland is to fully grasp these opportunities.

In order to achieve this, student awareness needed to be raised among the young people who will be following a career in the hospitality and tourism sector of the potential impacts of the 2012

Games. Students in the Department, study a wide range of courses, including International Hospitality Management, International Hotel and Tourism Management, Leisure and Events Management, International Travel and Tourism Management, Culinary Arts, and Cultural Management. This suite of courses covers a plethora of skills and knowledge that would be useful to the successful organization and implementing of an event such as the London 2012 Olympics.

The Pitch

Students enrolled on courses in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management has the choice in their final year of doing either a research paper or drawing up a realistic business plan. In previous years, many business plans that were completed were of a very high standard and resulted in some very exciting and feasible entrepreneurial opportunities being developed.

It was decided that the hosting of The London 2012 Olympics provided a unique opportunity for these students to not only get involved in the Olympics themselves, but to also consider business opportunities that may arise as a result of the events.

It was further envisaged that opportunities and lessons learnt could be sustainable as they could be carried forward to the World Police and Fire Games being hosted by Belfast in 2013. This event will bring approximately 25,000 people to Northern Ireland. Additionally, the 2014 Commonwealth Games being hosted by Glasgow could also reap the benefits of an infrastructure set up in Northern Ireland as a result of the 2012 Olympics.

The consideration of Olympic themed business opportunities was advantageous as it provided a vehicle to develop students' business skills and acumen. Entrepreneurial skills would be developed which could be taken forward and used if they wished to set up their own businesses, as well as entrepreneurial skills which would be of benefit if they decided to work for an existing organisation. Communication and presentational skills would also be improved through the pitching of their plan during a Dragons' Den event.

The Partnership

In light of this, The Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management teamed up with The 2012 unit at The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in order to ensure that students could capitalize on any potential benefits that may arise. As an incentive, to encourage as many students as possible to choose the module, a prize for the best idea and “pitch” was sourced by DCAL. This included a visit to the Olympic Park to see the progress being made, a trip to Visit Britain’s Offices in London and work experience with The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). Additionally all participants received a goodie bag with Olympic related items provided by sponsors such as Adidas.

The project’s structure provided support for the students in developing their business plans. Towards the beginning of the module, a presentation was made to the students, focusing on the type of opportunities that may arise as a result of the 2012 Games, particularly in the areas of hospitality and tourism. This helped the students start to generate ideas.

Halfway through the module, there was a workshop/mentoring event which was attended by appropriate representatives. This was an opportunity for students to work through specific issues and address concerns. These mentors were from NITB, InvestNI and Deloitte. Additionally, students were mentored by academic staff on a weekly basis throughout the module.

When the students completed their business plans the project culminated in a Dragons’-Den-style event. Students pitched their business plans to a panel of “dragons” – appropriate representatives from government/business/tourism and the hospitality sector and a high-profile personality, the head of procurement for LOCOG presented the prize for the best pitch.

The Inspire Mark

As part of the process it was decided to apply for the Olympic Inspire Mark to recognise the student’s achievements as well as its use as a marketing tool. This mark is offered to non-commercial organizations delivering projects and events genuinely inspired by the London 2012 Olympics. Only the most accessible, participative, inspiring and stimulating projects and events achieve the mark – across sport, culture, education, environment, volunteering and business

skills and The Pitch was successful in its application (<http://www.london2012.com/about-us/our-brand/inspire-programme.php>).

From the outset it was decided that if the “pilot” was successful, there could be scope to investigate the possibility of rolling the idea out across other departments within the university, running it in 2011 and 2012. However, before this decision could be made, it was important to ascertain the success of the project from all interested parties.

AIMS

This project was conducted in order to explore how students studying hospitality and tourism courses could fully capitalise on the opportunities provided by the London 2012 Olympic Games. Additionally, the project sought to explore how the development and strengthening of partnership arrangements between The University of Ulster and Private and Public organisations could contribute to and improve the student experience. It was envisaged that the outcome of the exercise would help to inform the future development of the module assessing the feasibility of rolling the module out across other modules within the University.

METHODOLOGY

Only 12 students took part in the project along with 5 mentors from industry. Based on this small population it was evident that in order to collect meaningful data from the pilot the most suitable methodology to pursue would be the use of focus groups. According to Collins and Hussey (2003, p.166) a focus group is “used to gather data relating to the feelings and opinions of a group of people who are involved in a common situation.” In this regard the focus groups conducted within this study were convened to gather opinion from both the students and the mentors.

Within focus groups, individual group members’ interactions and responses are both encouraged and more closely controlled to maintain the focus. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic being discussed and they are encouraged to discuss their points of view without any pressure to reach a consensus (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Rather than having a structured interview schedule the researcher used a list of points to

be discussed which were derived from the data relating to the project therefore allowing the participants a certain freedom to discuss the issues they considered pertinent. This research was able to reveal interesting data not only in relation to the student's perception of the project but also in relation to the perception of the mentors involved.

The second aspect of the study observed attitudinal data collected using a discussion forum in which students were encouraged to reflect on their learning on a weekly basis.

A multi-faceted approach, incorporating an informal focus group and a final reflection on the experience was used to ascertain the views of the dragons in relation to this partnership approach to learning were used. This allowed the dragons to discuss the project as a group and also express their own individual observations of the project.

FINDINGS

The 12 students involved were probed using the following general topic areas:

1. What did you enjoy about the module?
2. What did you not enjoy?
3. How beneficial was the mentoring session?
4. How beneficial was the actual pitch?
5. What did you learn from the module?
6. What did you think of being able to pitch your ideas to industry specialists?
7. How beneficial was it to be involved with the Inspire mark and the associated Olympic Games?
8. How could the module be improved?
9. Other Comments

All students interviewed stressed how important it was to be offered a module which allowed them to apply the theory that they had learnt to a real life situation. Although many other modules that they had studied were very useful and appropriate to the Hospitality and Tourism Industry, this module allowed them to specifically see how the theory could be put into practice.

Students enjoyed all aspects of the module except the amount of time and work that was required to put the business plans together.

Students also commented on how beneficial it was to have time to talk to industrialists and get advice on how to improve upon their plans. The mentors knowledge and expertise was crucial in highlighting potential pitfalls and areas which required more research.

Students found the pitch intimidating. Standing in front of a team of 'Dragons' was very difficult, especially since they had no real knowledge of who they were. Although the students were familiar and used to doing presentations, this was a more stressful experience. However, despite these issues the students found the experience very worthwhile and useful for their future career aspirations.

One common thread of responses that emerged from the focus group session was how much more difficult it was to draw up a business plan compared with what their initial perceptions were. Many were surprised at the amount of research and effort that was necessary to pull the whole thing together. Others were surprised at how much money was needed to get their ideas up and running. Initially, some students had found the Inspire Mark and the associated relationship with the Olympics suffocating. Some even went as far as claiming that some students who had wanted to study the Business Plan module had changed to the research paper option as their initial ideas had little if anything to do with the Olympics. However, once those who did opt for this elective realized how far reaching the options were, found coming up with ideas relatively easy. Moreover, the students recognized how useful the module and its associated Inspire Mark were for job applications and curriculum vitae entries. The module runs over a 12 week semester and one pertinent point raised by students was the desire to spread the module over two semesters, allowing more time to carry out the required market and consumer research that was necessary for the projects. Interestingly, the 'dragons' were also surprised at how much work the students had carried out within such a short period of time.

The second aspect of the research methodology that was carried out involved an informal focus group session with those stakeholders associated with the project. Although some interesting data was gleaned from this source it was decided to ask those involved to reflect on their experience and provide a statement summarizing their opinion about the exercise. These reflections were as follows:

- “Brilliant– a really good exercise. Well done!” - *Louise Kearney Northern Ireland Tourist Board.*
- "The Inspire mark is a badge of excellence which is only awarded to the very best projects and events so that they can be recognised as being officially part of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Inspire projects must be non-commercial; participative and accessible; inspired by or energised by the 2012 Games; well planned and managed; inspiring and involving young people; and about supporting participation in sport, culture, education, volunteering, sustainability, or business opportunities as appropriate. I am delighted to have been able to work with the University to achieve the Inspire mark for the Pitch. It is an excellent project which has harnessed the unique inspiration of the Olympic Games to encourage the students involved to be creative and innovative in generating business ideas, enhanced their skills in their crucial final year to help them when it comes to pursuing self-employment or employment in an existing organisation, and also created and strengthened partnerships between the University and other public and private sector organisations." - *Julie Jamison, Inspire Programmer for Northern Ireland 2012 Unit, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure*
- “Thanks for the opportunity to take part in your Dragons' Den project. It's good to be able to contribute to any project which helps what we hope may be the entrepreneurs of tomorrow. I believe that the more exposure that students get to the business world the better prepared they are likely to be when they eventually move on from college. I think that it is also important in their own personal development and confidence. Your students performed very well and with a lot of enthusiasm for their subjects. I can see a lot of potential for further development of the project and maybe a focus into viability and finance. No matter what walk of life they end up in, the ability to understand whether any investment is likely to give them an adequate return is very important. I hope all of the students found it worthwhile. It's good to see that innovative teaching can make learning enjoyable. Good luck for the future”. - *Liam McKeating InvestNI*

- “From my involvement on the project it provides the students an excellent opportunity to showcase their creative and presentation skills, understand the commercial application of a practical idea, contribute ideas to their own local economy and thereby engage in the Northern Ireland corporate agenda, and to effectively integrate academic learning and business application in a virtual/real commercial environment. The quality of the students in terms of their ideas, preparation, presentation skills and enthusiasm was a testament to the learning process”. - *Dawn Johnston Deloitte LLP*
- “Congratulations to Ian Bickerstaff and his team on delivering a programme that really bridges the gap between academia and industry. This Programme will greatly help students transition into the workplace and provide potential employers with a source of well prepared recruits.” - *Gerry Walsh Head of Procurement LOCOG*

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is evident that The Pitch was a useful project, well received by all who participated. Although there were very little differences between the approach that was adopted and the existing Business Plan module in terms of the learning outcomes assessed and the module framework, the use of the Olympic Games as a catalyst made the module interesting and relevant. Not only did the students gain an understanding of the scope of the Olympic Games, but they were able to investigate the plethora of economic opportunities that will arise as a result of 2012. The use of mentors from industry ensured that students were provided with an opportunity to investigate real life issues when developing a business plan. These mentors were able to bridge the gap between academia and industry challenging students to think outside the box. In addition to the entrepreneurial skills that were developed, students were given a unique opportunity to develop their presentation skills pitching their ideas to a panel of industry specialists. Although students have many opportunities to develop these skills throughout their normal course of study, the presentation to the ‘Dragons’ prepared them for a different type of presentation ensuring that they are ready for job interviews and job presentations.

The partnerships that were formed between The University of Ulster, DCAL, NITB, Deloitte, InvestNI and LOCOG were invaluable from a teaching perspective. This array of expertise ensured that all stakeholders associated with the project were able to contribute and learn from

each other. It was evident that the group of dragons was very supportive of the opportunity to become involved in such an initiative and contribute to the future development of the student body.

The decision to apply for the Inspire Mark was felt to be a necessary part of the project. From a student perspective, this made the participants feel that they were making a real and valuable contribution to the 2012 Olympic Games and were able to develop their own understanding and knowledge of the Olympic ethos. Although the project resulted in only one winner, all participants input was recognized and the message of “Inspire Yourself, Inspire Others and Do Your Best” was emphasized and students were encouraged to take this message further as part of their future career plans.

In addition to the pedagogical benefits that arose as a result of the project, many marketing opportunities for The University of Ulster were also realized. In addition to industry being made aware of university activities that are taking place, there were also many media opportunities that arose. Additionally obtaining The Inspire Mark has meant that marketing literature can emphasize the links that the university has with industry and its desire to embrace the ethos of the Olympic Games.

CONCLUSIONS

The London 2012 Olympics have provided many opportunities for a plethora of stakeholders. The Hospitality and Tourism Industry and in fact the educators associated with this area are in a position to capitalize on these opportunities and contribute to the economic welfare of the UK as a whole. It is obvious that The Pitch was a success. All participants were complementary about the project and highlighted how the development and strengthening of partnerships between academia and industry can be beneficial to all involved. It is envisaged that further developments of this project will take place, allowing students to complete their plans over a longer period of time and opening up access to other interested departments within the University of Ulster.

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