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**Title** Experiential Learning – A Learning Worth Having? Academic Perceptions of the use of Experiential Learning in the first year of Business Higher Education.  
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## **Experiential Learning – A Learning Worth Having?**

### **Academic Perceptions of the use of Experiential Learning in the first year of Business Higher Education.**

In recent years there has been much debate within both academic institutions and in business practice as to whether business schools are providing students with the learning they need to build essential business knowledge and competencies to practice effectively when in employment (Levy and Petrulis, 2012; Scherperel and Bowers, 2006 and Tynjälä, 2008). The charge has been made that business education “is too much about rigour and not enough about relevance” (Smith, 2005, p. 357) and “does not prepare students for the realities of business life” (Scherperell and Bowers, 2006, p. 13). Similarly, within Business Schools, there are many concerns and issues relating to student learning; that students are passive in their learning, have poor motivation and have poor self-directed learning skills (Croney, 2016; Rolfe, 2002 and Taylor and Bedford 2004).

Employability is also of concern to both universities and students and a key challenge for curriculum developers within business schools is to develop programmes which will produce both students *of* business as well as students *for* business. Many universities and business schools faced with these challenges have looked to introduce modules which adopt an experiential learning (hereafter EL) approach which by its very nature requires more student participation (Fenwick, 2005) and has been cited as being more interesting and engaging for students (Zimitat *et al.*, 1994 and Valenzuela *et al.*, 2017).

This paper will present the findings of research undertaken at a large successful business school in the UK who, faced with these challenges, decided to introduce a new EL module across its eighteen UG programmes in the first year to develop students with the skills and abilities to succeed at university and to tackle real life business problems, projects and enquiries. Research was conducted into both academic and student perceptions of the use of EL however this paper reports only on the perceptions and experiences of academics within the process and not those of students, which will be published in a later paper.

This research contributes to the extant research in this area in a number of ways. Firstly, most of the research conducted into the use of EL and the experiences of educational practitioners has been conducted in academic disciplines other than business (Chan, 2016) and has taken a quantitative approach which has not allowed for open dialogue focused specifically on classroom experiences. Furthermore, the scale of the module and the number of academics involved within this research is significant and the capacity to facilitate active and interactive pedagogical approaches within such a context will be of interest to many within universities who are faced with increasing pressures to simultaneously cut costs whilst improving students’ engagement.

A methodological approach was needed which would allow for academics’ experiences and perceptions of the EL module to be identified, recorded and explored. A phenomenological position

is particularly suited to a study that aims to improve understanding of the experience of a particular situation (Willig, 2013) and was therefore taken.

Staff insight was collected from three focus groups conducted at the end of the yearlong module. Focus groups “can encourage recall and stimulate opinion elaboration” (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.62) and were particularly useful in this research to help explore the experiences of the academics as a group in a specific context (Billig, 1991). The participants were a pre-existing group who had met formally on five previous occasions during the year as part of the support which had been provided by the faculty to individuals to act as facilitators on the module. Template analysis (King, 1998), a generic style of thematic analysis, was used to analyse the data as it offered a balance of structure and flexibility in how it handled the textual data.

Initial analysis of the research has shown that in the main staff perceptions and experience of facilitating on the module are positive and they have engaged with the pedagogic approach taken in the module. What was apparent however was that, even with faculty support throughout the year, there was still not a common understanding of the ‘approach’ and that many were confused with their role within the workshops with some finding it hard to make the transition from “sage on the stage to guide on the side” (King, 1993).

Three key themes emerged for academic participants regarding their perceptions and experiences whilst facilitating on the module: Challenge, insecurity and relationships. These themes and subthemes are detailed in Table 1. The challenges for staff broadly concur with the findings of Lee *et al.* (2014) and Peterson (2004) namely that students need to be orientated to the module and that the project set must be appropriate to engage students, with links between theory and application, and challenge students to justify their actions. A second critical theme of insecurity demonstrates that faculty staff do require ongoing professional development and support to develop as facilitators to assuage these perceived insecurities. This was highlighted also by Ertmer & Glazewski (2015) in their findings. EL as an approach however did have a significant positive motivational impact on staff in terms of building relationships with both students and fellow academics. There was a real ‘team spirit’ and a sense of a ‘community of practice’ between the academics and they valued the development sessions which were scheduled throughout the year.

This research has indicated that academic facilitators do believe that an EL approach to business education is worth adopting in spite of some of the challenges which are prevalent. There is a consensus that students do benefit from the approach although these may not be realised until later in their educational journey. Consequently, it is important for further research to be conducted with this cohort to see whether the benefits of a more self-directed learning approach are attained.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes from Academic Focus Group

Theme	Sub-Theme	
Challenge	Student Types	Team Impact
		Group Impact
		Other Students
	Attendance	Group Impact
		Team Impact
	Size	
	Task	Real Deliverables
Worthwhile		
Education System	Assessment	
	HE	
Insecurity	Secondary/Tertiary	
	Support/Training	
	Content	
	Style and Structure	
	Fees	
Relationships	With Students	
	With Staff	

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