

TMI David Hughes Memorial Award 2016

Placement Experience – Green Tourism

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Course: International Tourism Management BA
(Hons)

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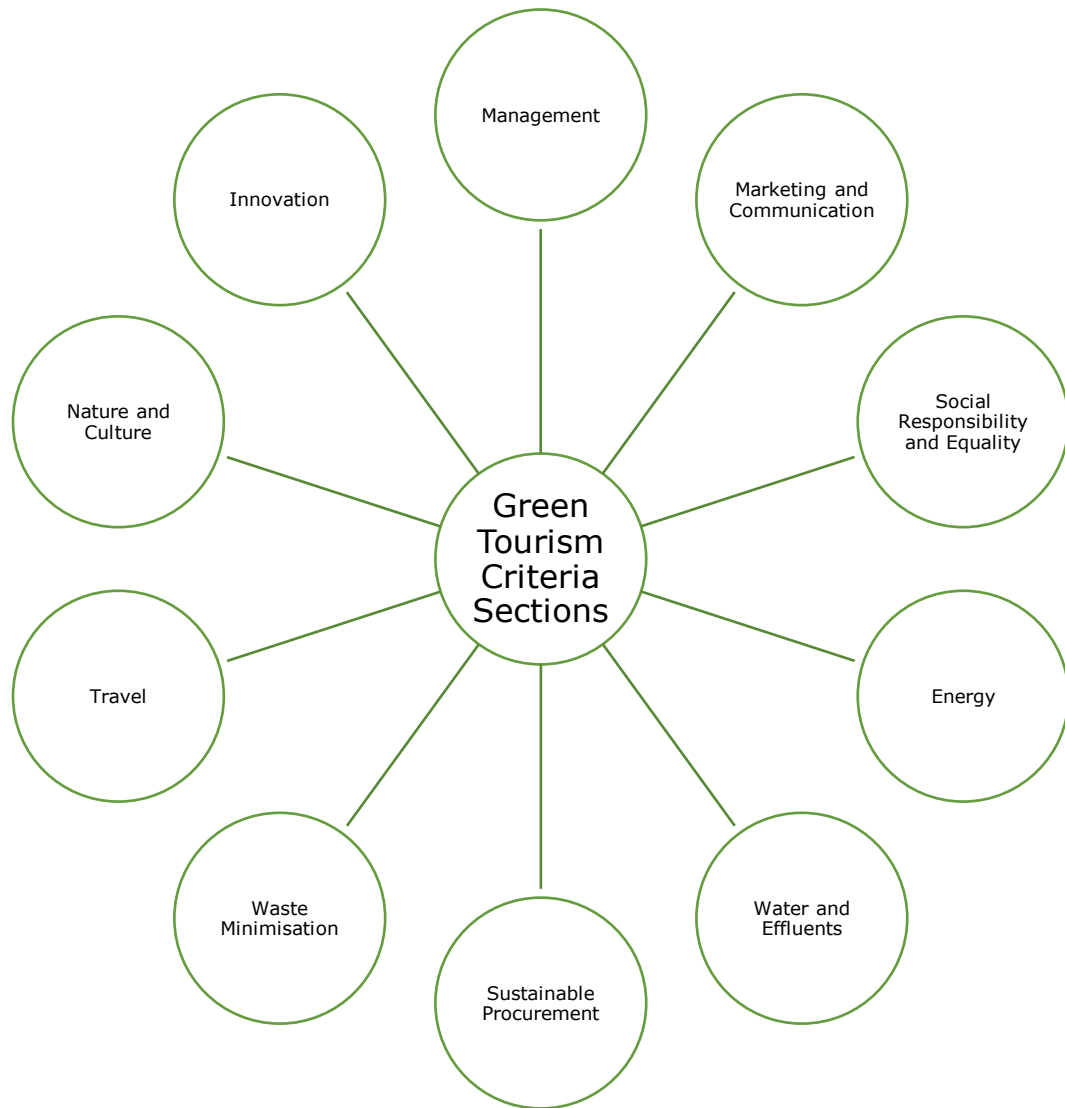
1.0 Introduction

This report reflects on experience gained while on a 48 week placement at Green Tourism (GT), constituting the 3rd year placement element of my BA (Hons) International Tourism Management degree at Robert Gordon University. GT is a Scotland based sustainability accreditation programme, operating with over 15 years' experience in pursuit of improving and encouraging sustainability throughout the Tourism and Hospitality sectors. Across the UK, Ireland and Canada alone, GT has a following of over 2000 members making it one of the world's largest accreditation programmes (Green Business UK 2015). According to Tjolle (2014 p. 1) at TravelMole, GT is considered, *"one of the most rigorous of its kind and is the only certification programme independently validated by the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (TCRT) on behalf of VisitEngland, VisitWales and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and endorsed by VisitScotland and Failte Ireland."*

Working with an array of Tourism and Hospitality businesses, GT offers bespoke advice which allows their members to maximise their business potential. Membership with GT includes a biennial assessment against the GT Version V Criteria to ensure that all of their members are continuing to develop and implement actions towards sustainable business practice. The Criteria covers 10 areas relating to sustainability with measures in each being scored from 0-5 as illustrated on the following page.

The growth of GT as a business mirrors a growing awareness (by both industry and customers) of sustainable and environmental issues linked to Tourism provision. As one of the fastest growing industries, Tourism is a key source of revenue for many countries (Fien, Calder and White 2010) with 2013 statistics indicating Tourism is worth 9% of the UK'S GDP, translating into £126.9 billion (Tourism Alliance 2015). Often portrayed in a rose-tinted way, Tourism highlights things such as encouraged global connectivity, benefits to local economies and infrastructure. However, according to Hammond (2013 p. 1), *"while the positives are often widely broadcast...the negatives are less likely to be discussed, including greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption and waste management"*. Indeed, Tourism has many negative repercussions which have

encouraged stakeholders in Tourism to acknowledge that something has to change. This is where businesses such as GT come in and thrive.



Based on Green Tourism Criteria Version V (Proctor 2015 p. 5).

Based on Green Tourism Criteria Version V (Proctor 2015 p. 5).

Employee management and internal communication elements experienced during my placement are discussed throughout the report, aiming to demonstrate how these areas are crucial if GT is to be successful in its overall aim of continued growth within Scotland and further afield.

Although GT is not a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in its own right, it clearly reflects many of the sustainability issues required for consideration by any DMO. This synergy indicates that much of my experience and knowledge gained could be replicated within a DMO with specific elements being highlighted throughout the report which could be applied within a DMO environment.



2.0 Choice of Green Tourism and Expectations for Placement

My interest in sustainability was sparked after covering a university module that focused on sustainability within the tourism industry, highlighting its growing importance and the influence tourism has on sustainability. For example, Tourism is a catalyst for sustainability due to the damage inflicted by tourist activity, however it simultaneously raises awareness of the issue to consumers and industry.

Our choices translate into negative and positive impacts on the environment whether we realise it or not. This may be through things such as if we buy local, travel choices, energy management or our commitment to recycling. Choices as such interest me and how they can be transferred from personal to industry scale. Where sustainability is concerned the phrase "*ignorance is bliss*" is no longer viable in the management of tourism whether at DMO level or filtering down to areas such as the management of tourism providers. GT is aware of this, thus one of the key reasons as to why I applied to do my placement with them was so I could see how businesses within Tourism incorporated sustainability into their operations and values.

My primary expectation from my placement was to gain experience working within my chosen industry. However, my expectations also included having the opportunity to engage in a testing yet rewarding environment, working and learning from people across the organisation to challenge what I had learnt at university in order to gain a different perspective.

Where my career is concerned, the experience highlighted to me that I would like to experience as many areas of Tourism as possible to gain a holistic understanding of how everything links. In the long-term, I would like to pursue the sustainability route as it is the future for almost every industry. Additionally, I would like to be involved with how we can make it more engaging for the consumer because, as with any service industry, consumers are key.

3.0 The Psychological Contract

At the outset of my placement period I had to sign a contract of employment. This was expected, as such a document forms a vital part of any job. However, in reality, my agreement with GT went beyond a simplistic written agreement and what I actually agreed to was a "psychological contract". According to Osborn-Jones (cited in Rees and McBain 2004 p. 102) the psychological contract is, *"a set of implicitly agreed expectations between two parties, operating over and above the formal contract of employment, incorporating the parties' beliefs, values and aspirations"*. For the employee this may include things such as a safe working environment, being treated with fairness, respect and job security. Conversely, an employer may expect effort, loyalty and commitment from the employee (Collins 2013). By fulfilling these unwritten expectations, it builds trust and respect between the employee and employer and can increase morale and productivity from employees; leading to a positive employment relationship.

Effort and commitment results in a high standard of work from the employee, often triggering recognition and reward from the employer. For example, over the first few weeks of starting at GT I was committed to the job and completed tasks to a high standard, as supported by Appendix 2. This work was recognised and I was rewarded by being given the opportunity to work on projects such as the Green Tourism GoldStar Awards Conference 2014 and the Northern Ireland Project, further discussed in Appendix 1, later in the Placement year. In this instance I was meeting Green Tourism's expectations of me working hard and completing tasks to a high standard while they were meeting mine by giving me new opportunities.

Therefore, a psychological contract would be a vital element of any employment contract for a DMO due to its prevailing significance in generating positive employment relationships. From my own experience, my personal, pre-existing beliefs in sustainable values, reflected in the bedrock of GT operations,



demonstrated themselves through the passion and dedication I demonstrated in my work. Although I consider myself to always be a dedicated worker, undoubtedly understanding, agreeing with, and overall sharing a common goal with an employer leads to greater benefits for employee and employer alike. Quite simply, if a DMO employee shares a strong psychological contract with their employer, the results for the aims of the organisation and the actual destination itself can only be positive.

Green Tourism GoldStar Awards Conference 2014

From left to right: David Penker, Stuart Park, Jane Campbell, Jan Waters, Jon Proctor, Andrea Nicholas, Natalie Parsons, Sandra Barnes-Keywood, Stuart Brain.

Northern Ireland Project April Workshop 2015

From left to right: Gill Thomson, Natalie Parsons, Life Adventure Rep

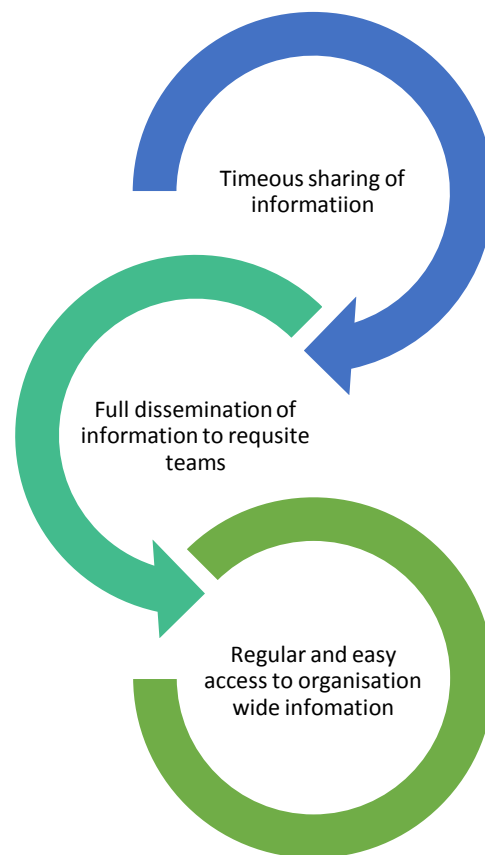
4.0 Internal Communications

GT is a relatively small organisation consisting of 14 members. However, many of the employees are not in the office at all times. Additionally, the employees are empowered to work individually on various tasks, although on many occasions, certain members of the team must work closely together. The upshot of this working practice within the organisation means a system of efficient and effective communication is in place – and fully understood and used by all members of staff. The concept of internal communications in its stripped back form can be described as, *“facilitating strategic connections and conversations within your organization”* (Melcrum 2015 p. 1). This is supported by Ritchie who suggests that, *“effective internal communication helps ensure that all members of the organisation are working collaboratively towards a common goal. It develops a cohesive culture and empowers employees to make the right decisions in line with the organisation’s goals. This in turn leads to greater*



efficiency and productivity and improves customer service” (Ritchie 2015 p. 1).

GT conducted an internal communications audit which identified the following



(Russel 2015 p. 9)

areas which needed greater consideration:

Below are some of the highlighted action points from the Green Tourism Internal Communications Audit Report which was implemented during the period of my placement. From the position of my own development it was extremely useful to see such a policy being implemented as it obviously meant some changes to existing practices which can be a fraught experience for any organisation. I was able to observe how management and all employees worked through this process successfully for the overall benefit of GT operations.

It should also be noted that all the initiatives highlighted here could prove beneficial to any DMO, due to the circumstances of operations that many DMO's would be expected to share with GT. In particular, it is likely that many DMO staff spend considerable time out-with main office (like Green Tourism assessors), the risk that some information not known by all staff (demonstrating need for a knowledge hub, and at the very least, regular emails) and the need for excellent team to team communication.

4.1 Best Practice Meetings for Assessors

It was identified in the audit that Assessors would like to have more of an opportunity to discuss the best practices of GT businesses with other Assessors so that they could share their knowledge and new ideas as it is not very often that all of the Assessors are in the office at the same time.

4.2 Technical 'Knowledge Hub'

It was expressed that technical information was often lost once a report had been completed and that it could be beneficial to have place to store technical information such as, "*new products/innovations, best practice, potential case studies, local destination information, and potential members/sales leads*" (Russel 2015 p. 9). This led to the creation of a Technical Knowledge Hub where all relevant information was stored, shared and could be accessed by any staff members.

4.3 Bi-weekly Organisation Wide Information Email

There was a general consensus that everyone would like to be more informed with what was going on internally and externally with GT. To meet this need the action was taken to create and circulate a biweekly email which would hold any new and upcoming information.

4.4 Team to Team Communications

The audit results highlighted that there was a lack of understanding between both the Technical and Membership teams as to what each team did such as who was responsible for certain things and what processes each had in place for different tasks. To address this issue a number of actions were taken: an internal flow chart of the organisation illustrating who does what in each team,

optional assessment visits for Membership Team employees so they could experience part of what the Technical Team does and for the bi-weekly email to also be used to include any information that the Technical and Membership teams could exchange.

Each of the action points above should, in theory, improve internal communications at GT as they collectively streamline communications and break down barriers which previously prevented everyone being fully aware of information that affected their role.

5.0 Employee Learning and Development

The final element which I wish to address briefly is learning and development, the process of acquiring and nurturing new skills and knowledge which can relate to a specific job or can be used in a broader environment to aid career development (Art Of The Start 2014 p. 1). In the contemporary business world employee learning and development is essential for organisations to compete effectively in their chosen industry yet is often an overlooked area of management. Lipman (2013 p1) advocates, *"it's hard to think of an important aspect of management more neglected than development planning: helping your employees shape the future direction of their careers. Yet for a variety of reasons, this valuable activity is often ignored...or handled as a bureaucratic exercise...or an afterthought. Companies pay a high price: the loss of top young talent"*. Indeed, a recent study conducted by Hamori, Cao and Koyuncu (2012 p. 1) at the Harvard Business Review on 'Why Top Young Managers Are in a

Nonstop Job Hunt' indicated that, "*dissatisfaction with some employee-development efforts appears to fuel many early exits*". It was found that companies were generally meeting employees' needs for on-the-job development but they were not giving much attention to more formal development such as mentoring and coaching (Hamori, Cao and Koyuncu 2012). This highlights the importance of employee learning and development and why it should be taken seriously.

Based on my placement experience, I found that employee learning and development was of high importance to GT. For the duration of the year I received both formal and informal training. I underwent a tailored induction programme and was given different opportunities to develop my role within the company. For example, when I first started at the beginning of the placement year many of my tasks were highly supervised until I had gained the core skills which allowed me to do my work independently. Working with various members of staff allowed me to develop skills in different departments which increased my versatility within GT. Consequently, my confidence grew within the role as my increased knowledge enabled me to take on opportunities such as working on the Green Tourism Conference 2014 and managing the Trip Planning for the Northern Ireland Project as the learning and development element had given me the tools to do so.

6.0 Final Reflection

My experience at GT was a great experience in itself, and I feel has allowed me to develop many skills which could be transferable to working within a DMO. For example, I was able to develop my research and data management skills through my leadership role of the Northern Ireland Project. Secondly, my role within trip planning for Assessors required me to organise the logistics for trips lasting up to two weeks. Late changes occurred on a regular basis which challenged and developed my problem solving skills, often under pressure of time and conflicting requirements of several parties. Finally, the Northern Ireland Project gave an invaluable opportunity to understand and develop project management skills.

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Appendix 1 – Contributions to Green Tourism

Trip Planning

- Assisted with pre, during and post trip service for Assessors. This included things such as setting up trip groups, putting together trip maps and spreadsheets, offering out visit dates, offering/confirming visit dates, making trip packs, offering assistance to Assessors while they are on the trip if anything was required or if there were any problems, updating ACT! with post assessment information

Carbon Calculator

- Aided with the testing of the Carbon Calculator online tool while it was being developed. Additionally I inputted business's data into the calculator

Project - Northern Ireland Project 2014/15

- I was the lead Trip Planner for this Project, ensuring that every business had an Advisory and an Assessment. I planned seven separate trips for the Advisories and four separate trips for the Assessments. In total I was responsible for five Assessors over the length of the Project. Additionally I assisted with the creation and implementation of a workshop held in April 2015 for the Project which was based on how to make the most of your Green Tourism Award to help businesses prepare for their Assessments

Membership Support

- This included things such as answering Members' enquiries over both email and phone. Helping out with administrative tasks and occasionally report dispatching

Social Media and Members Images

- I had the task of 'following' and 'liking' all Green Tourism members on Twitter and Facebook. I also had to find and upload images of the businesses onto the Green Tourism website. Additionally I started a Pinterest account for Green Tourism

Project - Green Tourism Conference 2014

- Assisted with the planning and running of the event in Manchester, primarily working with the Membership Manager. This involved things such as managing the submission forms for the Gold Star nominees, being part of the judging panel for the Gold Stars, managing the inserts for the delegates and the extras from sponsors/exhibitors, putting together the Awards PowerPoint. The day before I helped setting up the venue for the event by helping put together conference bags and set up registration. On the day I aided with registration, guiding groups to different workshops and helping out wherever I was needed

Appendix 2 – Final Review with Placement Supervisor – Andrea Nicholas

Achievement of Learning Contract Objectives:

Natalie was a key member of the Technical Team competently undertaking Trip Planning and support for the Assessors. This resulted in very efficiently organised trips and high levels of pre and post assessment service. Natalie's support for the Technical and Membership Teams has been invaluable and has helped the whole company in delivering a good service to the Members and provided capacity for development and improvement of the company.

People Skills:

Natalie is a very good listener and always took good notes at meetings so she knew what she had to do. Her communication abilities and skills improved through the placement and she was able to provide valuable contributions to meetings at all levels including team meetings, company development, strategic and technical meetings. Natalie is assertive and has learnt during the placement to deal professionally with challenging situations/conversations within the team in a constructive and non-threatening manner.

Natalie has been a proactive part of both the Technical and Membership Teams. She integrated very well in both teams providing the support required but also contributing additional skills and abilities that exceeded the expectations of the teams. During her placement she has learnt the importance of good customer relations and is able to be diplomatic, persuasive and assertive and at the same time being cognitive of the best outcome for the company.

Through the Northern Ireland Project Natalie was exposed to a different business culture which meant adapting expectations and approach when dealing with the businesses. She learnt to understand this different culture and was able to adapt the company's procedures and processes to ensure the same level of service for the customers and a successful delivery of the Project.

Self-Reliance Skills:

From the very beginning of her placement, Natalie displayed a high level of maturity and confidence.

She already had a lot of the skills required; she is a quick learner and was able to offer skills and abilities that exceeded our expectations for the role. She was happy to do anything asked of her but after only a short time into the placement we took advantage of her abilities and her role was developed.

Natalie worked very well with all members of the team, she was positive about her job and always very appreciative of the experience and training was she was getting. She was quick to learn the skills required for new tasks and was able to work independently after only a short training period. Her eye for detail and pride in her work meant that it was consistent, of a good quality and

needed little if any checking or supervision.

Natalie has a very positive attitude to work and always wanted to achieve the best outcome. She has learnt during her placement that there is also a commercial consideration when approaching tasks and sometimes that requires a compromise around time spent to achieve perfection and a practical working result.

This was most evident in the Northern Ireland Project when timescales were very tight and Natalie had to plan her work and tasks to deliver outcomes to deadlines. In this project she was very good at keeping her line manager up to date with progress, highlighting potential problems and ways to avoid them and making suggestions to keep the project on time. As the main coordinator of the assessments on this project, Natalie worked independently without supervision and to very tight deadlines. However, she kept all project members up to date, organised over 200 assessment visits, analysed 100's of records of data and made sure the central database contained all the current information.

General Skills:

Natalie has an enquiring and inquisitive mind and that really helped with her role. During her placements Natalie's ability to identify solutions to problems and improvements to processes has increased.

We are a small team and sometimes there have been pressure situations when the normal routine has to change. Natalie has been really useful in these situations and has provided support and assistance to the team as required often requiring multi-tasking to ensure her tasks are also completed on time.

She has a very professional attitude to her work and is able to produce high quality, accurate and well thought out results. Throughout the placement Natalie has been very conscientious and dedicated to her role and she has had a positive approach to work. She has been very trustworthy, punctual and reliable and an asset to the company

Appendix 3 – Statements

COURSE LEADER STATEMENT FOR NATALIE PARSONS

As Course leader, I was extremely happy that Natalie spent her year industry placement at Green Tourism. I deliver the 2nd year “Sustainable Tourism” module, and throughout this module, Natalie consistently demonstrated a strong interest in, and passion for, a wide range of sustainability issues within tourism. Every week, no matter what concept we were focused on, Natalie could always be counted on to make pertinent, thoughtful comments and was often the instigator for the most interesting tutorial debates. I knew that Natalie was knowledgeable and mature enough, to prove an excellent placement student for Green Tourism – and based on my conversations with Green Tourism management and the final placement report, I was proven entirely correct.

Currently in her final year, Natalie is continuing to demonstrate a high level of commitment to her studies, and this dedication along-with her academic ability, leave me in little doubt that she will achieve a first class honours classification. Although Natalie has not yet decided on her future career, I know it will be within the tourism industry. Whichever organisations she works for within her future career will be getting a top rate employee who will, im sure, progress rapidly to the benefit of herself and her employer.

In my ten years of teaching, almost three at Robert Gordon University, I can honestly say I have never worked with a student who has shown as much academic ability, maturity and overall interest in the industry, as Natalie has demonstrated over the last few years. She really is worthy of any recognition that the judging panel is able to give her.



NATALIE PARSONS
GREEN TOURISM INTERN MAY 2014 – JUNE 2015

Natalie's role within Green Tourism was to provide support and assistance to the technical and membership teams that operate the Green Tourism Programme in the UK and Ireland.

Natalie's support for the technical and membership team has been invaluable and has helped the whole company in delivering a good service to the members and provided capacity for development and improvement of the company. Her communication with all members of the team including management was very good and she was just focussed on her tasks but was able to make constructive and useful suggestions on improvements of processes and company development.

Natalie already had a lot of the skills required; she is a quick learner and was able to offer skills and abilities that exceeded our expectations for the role. She was happy to do anything asked of her but after only a short time into the placement we took advantage of her abilities and her role was developed significantly to take on the coordination of the Northern Ireland Project.

Through the Northern Ireland project Natalie was exposed to a different business culture which meant adapting expectations and approach when dealing with the businesses. She learnt to understand this different culture and was able to adapt the company's procedures and processes to ensure the same level of service for the customers and a successful delivery of the project.

Natalie has an enquiring and inquisitive mind and that really helped with her role. During her placement Natalie's ability to identify solutions to problems and improvements to processes has increased. Based on some of the projects, tasks and situations she has had to deal, Natalie has developed her ability to think about alternatives and different ways to approach problems which proved to be very useful in the NI Project.

Natalie has been given and been able to cope with a high level of responsibility, taking tasks from the beginning to a successful completion. Despite some challenging and pressured situations generally Natalie has been able to work calmly and methodically. She has been able to provide constructive feedback, suggestions and recommendations in all her tasks and projects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Nicholas".

Andrea Nicholas
Managing Director, Green Tourism