Experiences of taking students on Business Trips:

with recommendations for organising successful Business Trips

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The Business School at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) employs approximately 150 academic staff in a state-of-the-art environment located in Hatfield Business Park. It offers 17 undergraduate degree programmes and 21 postgraduate programmes; there are about 80 research students, mostly working at doctoral level.

Business School staff are active in research in numerous areas, including complexity theory, institutional economics, economic modelling, efficiency measurement the creative industries, employment studies, finance, accounting, statistical methods and management science.

The University of Hertfordshire is the UK's leading business-facing university and an exemplar in the sector. In 2010 it won the Entrepreneurial University of the Year Award. It is one of the region's largest employers with over 2,700 staff and a turnover of £235million. In the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise it was given the highest rank for research quality among the post-1992 universities. It has a student community of over 24,500 including more than 2,000 international students from over eighty five different countries.

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Abstract

Visits to businesses provide an opportunity for students to see first-hand how different operations are managed, particularly in areas not often seen, such as manufacturing. They can be linked with classroom learning and teaching and can also provide opportunities for work-related assessment.

This paper presents the outcome of a teaching and learning project that aimed to take a number of undergraduate and postgraduate business students from the University of Hertfordshire on a variety of operations-related business trips during the academic year 2009/2010. The organisation of these trips is described and they are evaluated by students. It is demonstrated that such trips take some time to get organised but can be run on virtually no budget and are very well received by students.

A model for the development and implementation of business trips is presented.

Introduction

Business is essentially a practical, vocational subject, but often the teaching of it is restricted to the classroom. Visits to businesses provide an opportunity to see first-hand how different operations are managed, particularly in areas often not seen, such as manufacturing, supply chain activities or service back office.

The authors of this paper have been taking students on trips for a number of years, believing in the value of business trips to enhance student learning. This paper describes our experiences over the academic 2009/10 and makes recommendations to other HE tutors who wish to organise their own trips.

In this paper we describe the process of organising and implementing a range of visits for 150 students including: engagement with local businesses to set up the visits, devising assessment related to the visits, accompanying students on the visits and evaluation of the impact on students' learning experience. Having evaluated these visits we present a model for organising business trips, designed to help guide tutors who wish to organise their own visits.

Overall we found that the business trips were very successful. They help students learn directly from the workplace and provided excellent opportunities for work related assignments and primary research. They were very well received by students and encouraged close links between local employers and the University. Although challenging to set up initially, the trips were not impossible to coordinate. It is also possible to run trips with no budget.

Objectives of the Business Trips

The business trips were set up for undergraduate and postgraduate Business students. Most of the students were studying Operations Management related subjects, some were studying Music Management. The objectives of the business trips were to:

- enhance students understanding of business operations
- allow the students to see the application of theory in practice
- enhance class room learning and discussion by providing a live case study
- provide opportunities for work related assessment
- provide primary research opportunities for students through direct observation and discussions with managers who are running live operations.

What do we mean by 'Business Trip'?

When we started researching the literature in this area it became clear that there was no fixed term given to describe educational visits to business organisations. Indeed there is very little written about business trips organised for students in Higher Education. The term 'Field trip' is used to describe off site educational visits in science and geography, but this does not really suit what we are doing. We therefore use the term 'Business Trip' to refer to what we are doing.

For the purposes of our work the definition of 'Business Trip' is: 'an educational visit to the workplace to observe the live operation of business in the private or public sector'.

<u>Literature Review</u>

Although there does not seem to have been a great deal of research on the benefits of taking Higher Education students on business trips, there has been a great deal of research on the benefits of field trips, particularly at school level, and on Higher Education links with businesses. Business trips can also be linked to action learning, different learning styles and the development of employability skills.

The role of the business trip in the learning process

Beaty (2007) states "academic learning must be perceived as relevant, and be learnt in a way which promotes transfer". She stressed that students must understand when and how to transfer academic knowledge to the work place through understanding the significance of the ideas. She advocates the use of case studies and practical experiments. We are suggesting that this is taken a step further and students are given the opportunity to visit work places and use this experience, alongside their academic knowledge in assessments. As Beaty (2007) states "if the relevance is directly experienced by the students themselves, then the learning will be reinforced." Having the experience alone is not enough to ensure understanding, and Kolb's learning cycle (1984) suggests that a period of reflection is key to learning from experience. Linking the business trip to assessment gives the students the opportunity to reflect on the experience and how theory can be applied in a work situation. Beaty (2007) states that by

having the opportunity to learn from experiences (e.g. a business trip), students can become aware of the link between ideas and action.

Why take students on Business Trips?

Orion (1993) cites a number of benefits of taking school children on trips. He refers to Piaget (1970) who identified that the "hands-on experience" offered by trips help the move from concrete to more abstract levels of cognition. Orion (1993) suggests that the main role of the field trip in the educational process is the "direct experience with the concrete phenomena and materials". Experiential activities can help students to construct abstract concepts and can assist meaningful learning. This helps the student with long term memory of concepts as they experience deep as opposed to surface learning. Field trips also help students to gain information from the experience rather than passively receiving information from the teacher (Orion, 1993).

Dillon et al (2006) demonstrated that field work which was "properly conceived, adequately planned, well taught and effectively followed up" alongside their classroom experiences offers students the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills.

Eaton (2000, cited in Dillon et al, 2006) observed that outdoor learning experiences are more effective for developing cognitive skills than classroom based learning.

Emmons' (1997, cited in Dillon et al, 2006) research demonstrated that students' learning was enhanced by their shared and direct experience of the environment. Orion and Hofstein's (1991) study into field trips showed that in general students felt the trip had improved their knowledge.

Challenges to taking students on trips

Orion (1993) cites three main reasons for staff not taking students on trips – logistic limitations in the education system, inadequate teaching / learning materials and teachers being unfamiliar with non-teaching environments.

Dillon et al (2006) list a number of barriers to taking students on trips:

- "Fear and concerns about health and safety
- Teacher's lack of confidence in teaching outdoors
- School curriculum requirements
- Shortages of time, resources and support
- Wider changes within and beyond the education sector"

Preparation

The main ways of preparing students for field trips include study lessons, films, lectures, supplementary reading and outlines (Koran and Baker, (1978), cited in Bitgood 1989). Melton et al's study (1936, cited in Bitgood, 1989) found that students learned best when pre-visit preparation was the day before the trip rather than two, seven or fourteen days before.

Bitgood (1989) states that the most effective preparation techniques have still not been empirically established.

Studies have shown that students' prior knowledge of the environment of the field trip is very important for reaching required objectives. (Balling and Falk, 1982, Falk et al, 1978, Martin, Falk and Balling, 1981 – cited in Bitgood, 1989). Orion and Hofstein (1991) refer to the field trip's "novelty space". They discovered that if a setting was "novel" or new, the students had to investigate it and only once they were familiar with the space, could they concentrate on their assignments. Orion and Hofstein's novelty space includes cognitive, psychological and geographical factors. Falk's unpublished study (cited in Orion, 1989) demonstrated the importance of school students being given a complete agenda of the trip so that they understand exactly what they will do and when, otherwise it is difficult for them to engage with the learning opportunities.

This can be backed up by research by Ballantyne and Packer (2002, cited in Dillon et al, 2006) which found significant differences between the students who had completed pre-trip activities and those students who did not. Healey et al (2001) also stress the importance of pre-trip activities such as preparatory meetings, discussions, explanations and materials making the trip more accessible and inclusive.

Openshaw and Whittle (1993: 63-64, cited in Dillon et al, 2006) stress the need for balance between "the students' desire for a structure within which they can feel comfortable and not threatened and the added excitement caused by the unexpected."

Learning activities and assessment

It is generally accepted that learning activities and assessment linked to trips need to be carefully designed to ensure maximum effectiveness in terms of meeting learning objectives and the student experience.

Ballantyne and Packer (2002: 228, cited in Dillon et al, 2006) highlight the potential problem of over-structured learning activities. They state that "the use of worksheets, note-taking and reports were all unpopular with the students, and did not appear to contribute greatly to [their] learning environment".

Lai's (1999) study showed that although some students preferred a guided tour led by the teacher, others preferred student-led exploration.

Recommendations from the literature review

Bitgood (1989), Orion (1989, 1993), and Dillon et al (2006) make some useful suggestions for anyone planning trips. These reflect our own experiences and can be summarised:

- Training and support should be provided for staff organising trips
- Careful preparation of the students is needed before the trip
- Attention should be paid to the structure of the trip

- Follow up activities and assessment should be organised as these enhance the learning experience
- Evaluation of the field trip is important

Methodology

The Business Trips were set up during Semester A and B during the academic year 2009-10.

Trips were organised and implemented in the following stages:
1. *Identification of possible organisations to visit.*
2. *Contacting organisations.*
3. *Reconnaissance.* Once the trips were agreed in principle the organisations were visited.
4. *Assignment set up.* All trips were in some way linked to assessment of the module
5. *Transport.* Transport was arranged where needed.
6. *Visit preparation.* Students were informed of and prepared for the visit.
7. *Implementation.* The visits were undertaken.
8. *Follow up.*

Trip evaluation

The trips were evaluated in two stages. Firstly, immediately after each trip, students were asked to engage in an on-line discussion sharing their experiences and thoughts about the trips. Second, towards the end of term and several weeks after the trip students were asked to complete a questionnaire evaluating various aspects of the trip including: the usefulness of the trip, how enjoyable they found it, whether they preferred to give up class time or their own time to go on a trip and any suggestions for improvements. If they missed a trip they were asked why and whether they felt they had missed out as a result. Please see appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire.

Results

In total 150 students from 6 modules level 1, 2, 3 and MBA went on visits. Eight different organisations were visited from various sectors including manufacturing, supply chain, food retail, public sector, IT and third sector. Attendance at the trips was very good with almost all students who signed up attending.

Organisation and implementation

1. *Identification of possible organisations to visit.* Contacts were sought from placement organisations, family members, university staff, students, friends, employer conferences/ exhibitions and local knowledge. Preference was given to visits with very local organisations that were easy for students to travel to.
2. *Contact.* A total of 23 organisations were contacted via email, telephone or, in one instance, by simply walking into the organisation and asking a member of staff. Out of these contacts a total of seven organisations agreed to a visit. One of these visits was

postponed by the organisation due to shop floor reorganisation. Some leads seemed very promising but then went cold

3. *Reconnaissance*. Five organisations were visited by the tutor prior to the student trip. This reconnaissance visit was time consuming but had several benefits:
    a. helped develop a closer, more personal, relationship with the organisation;
    b. provided an opportunity for the tutor to discuss learning objectives and assessment possibilities thus ensuring good educational outcomes for the student;
    c. provided an opportunity to assess possible health and safety issues and the completion of a risk assessment;
    d. provided an opportunity for the tutor to learn about the organisation and ask questions before the student trip.

4. *Assessment*. All trips were in some way linked with assessment, providing students with opportunities to undertake some primary observation and question business managers. Students were able to relate their assessment task directly to the work place. For four of the trips students were free to use the opportunity or not. Three of the trips were fully integrated with the module assessment, requiring students to undertake specific research related to the organisation, evaluate it and make recommendations. Where this was the case more careful pre-trip preparation was necessary including the relevant ethics approval and negotiation with the organisation about access to information and opportunities for Q&A with business managers. Special care was taken in the assignment brief to ensure students were clear about the task and research and information required. This was reinforced during weekly class time and via VLE discussions and group assignment areas.

5. *Transport*. Transport was perhaps the most constraining factor. There was a need to keep transport costs to a minimum so that all students were able to participate regardless of their access to transport. With this in mind, all trips organised were either within walking distance of the university or utilised the university's own free minibus when it was available. Students of a first year module were asked if they were willing to arrange their own transport but they were reluctant as very few had their own cars. At least two trips could not go ahead because transport could not be provided. One trip utilising public transport was successfully organised for post graduate students. The timing of trips was also a key factor for attendance. As a general rule trips were organised during lecture/seminar time and as a result of this (plus lots of reminding emails and announcements) attendance was very good. When students travelled independently clear directions to the location were prepared.

6. *Visit preparation*. Students were prepared for the visits via discussion during class time and related assignment work. These discussions were reinforced on-line. Some groups of students were given task sheets to fill in during the trip as well as suggested areas to look out for and possible questions to ask business managers. Other groups of students, particularly those with closely related assignment work, drafted their own questions and were able to direct their own observations. To ensure good attendance reminders were issued in class the week before, announcements made on discussion board and emails sent to students. Very clear instructions were given on where to meet and at what time.

Very few students actually forgot on the day. Overbooking of visits was practiced to ensure that all visits were full. Where too many students turned up a first come first served approach was adopted, with the later students going on a later visit.

7. *Implementation.* Staff always accompanied students on the visits and registers were taken at the meeting point. Students were required to adhere to the security and health and safety policies of the organisation being visited. In some cases this required students to wear safety clothing.

8. *Follow up.* After the visits discussion group activities were undertaken in class to reinforce learning. In one instance, to support assignment work, the Business Managers visited the university for a question and answer session some weeks after the visit. On-line discussions were opened requiring students to explain and share what they had learnt as a result of the visit. Some students even shared photographs they had taken during the visit. Please see below. Finally, thank yous were sent to organisations.

Evaluation of visits

Studynet (online) discussion board comments

The first formal evaluation of the visits was via on-line class discussion. Participation in the discussions about the visits was not particularly high but there was some useful feedback about the visits. On-line comments from students were overwhelmingly positive:

'I think that it's a very good way to visit a company that provides services before taking lectures, to have an idea in which way service providers work. I think it's motivating too, makes the class more interesting (zero non attendance for me in this module)….. and I felt more involved'.

'The tour today was very informative it made me realise how much actually goes on behind the scenes. There is so much more involved in the preparation and delivery of the food than I had initially anticipated... Going through the different processes with David has made me realise the importance of his role as the service operations manager.'

'The tour helped me get a deeper and more comprehensive understanding about the supply chain and how they were operated. …….it was a good opportunity for me to translate the knowledge I learned from the textbook into practice!'

'Firstly I must say that I really approve the practical orientation of the assignment. By applying the theory from the lectures to a specific company and visiting the premises one engages much more with it.'

'More time should have been spent on the visit as 30 minutes isn't long enough'

This positive feedback was passed on to the employers providing the trips together with thank you emails.

Evaluation Questionnaire

The questionnaire was circulated to students at the end of the semester some weeks after the trips had taken place. A total of seventy five questionnaires were completed and returned by students. This represents half of the total population of students attending the visits. In hindsight the questionnaire should have been circulated sooner after the visits in order to get a higher response rate.

Question one - In this question students were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statements: 'I am happy to give up own time to go on a company visit' and 'I am happy to give up class time to go on a company visit'. Overall most students indicated that they were slightly happier to go on visits in class time. However, when undergraduates were analysed separately they had a much stronger preference for trips in class time, but did not mind giving up their own time. When postgraduates are analysed separately they disagree with giving up class time to go on trips but are happier to give up their own time.

In part b) of this question student were asked to rate the usefulness of lectures/seminars, organisational visits and guest lectures. Here undergraduates rated lectures and seminars as most useful with trips a close second. For post graduates lectures/ seminars were very closely ranked with trips, trips being only slightly higher rated. Guest speakers were the least ranked by both groups.

Question two - In this question students who did not attend a trip were asked why not. Seventeen students responded to this question. Most students (7) said they were not given the opportunity, one person said they did not want to go, five missed the trip for a variety of reasons: Forgot, went on the wrong day, got lost, had a deadline to meet; and four did not attend for another reason: Getting visa, thought the visit was full, family commitments and not in area at time of visit. Mostly these people agreed quite strongly that they would like to go on a visit. Only one person agreed that they did not see the point of the visit.

Question three - In this question students were asked to rate the visits. The most popular visits were Domino's Pizza, the Police and Computacentre. Students mostly found all trips enjoyable and helpful for their assignment. There was some agreement that it was helpful for module understanding. However students did not agree that trips were helpful for exams, or preparing for employment.

Finally students were asked how the trips could be improved in the future. Students commented that they would like more pre-visit information, preparation, directions and meeting points. They requested that visits be more focused on their own particular assignment. They also requested follow up sessions after the visits to help understanding and more visits to larger organisations.

Student performance in assessment

Where the business trip was most closely related to the assessment (compulsory part of it) students were most engaged and performed better. However, it should be noted that in these instances the assignments were newly devised with the business trip in mind and there is not a straightforward comparison between the quality of work produced by students going on a trip

with those who did not. However, it was observed that where the trip was an optional part of assessment work on the whole students did not use the opportunity to use the visited organisation as the subject of their assignment.
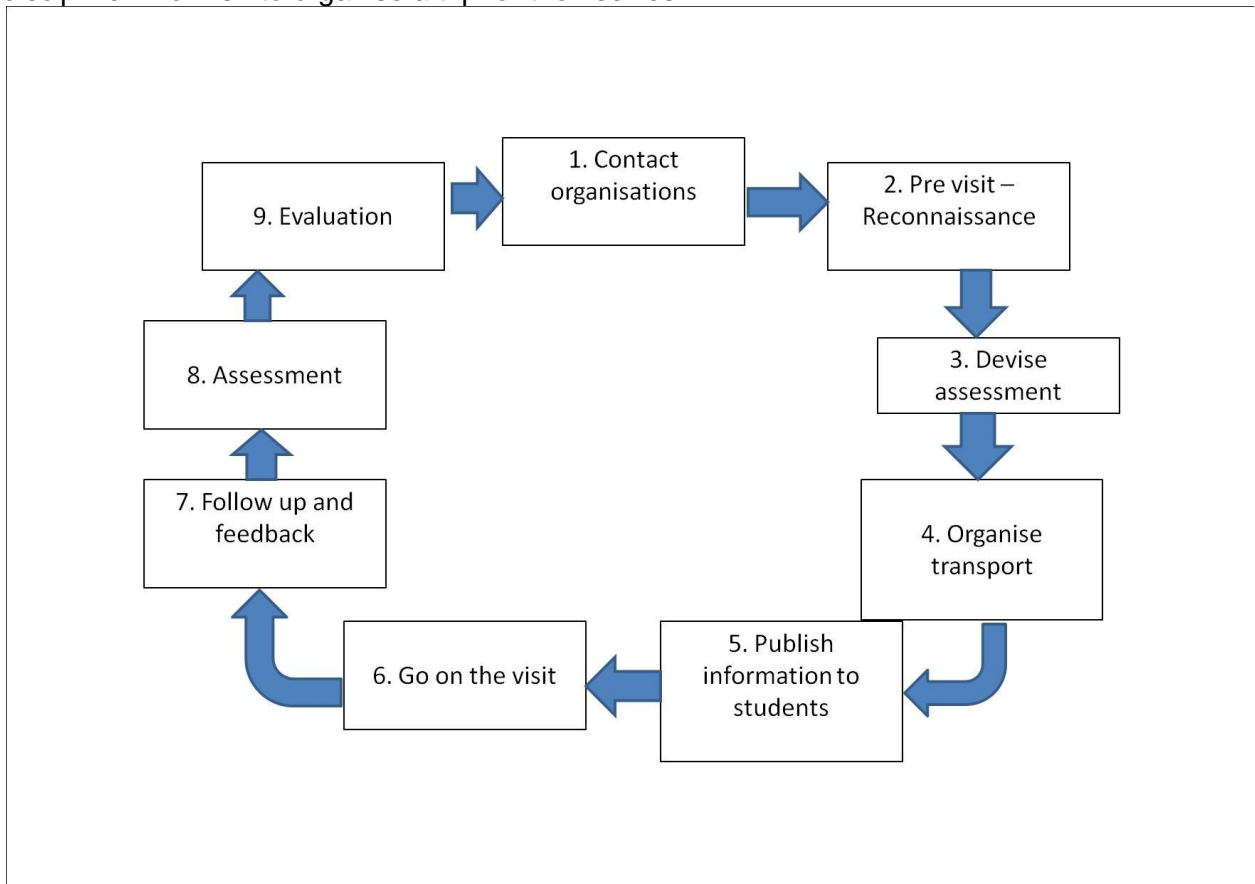
Conclusions

On the whole business trips can be seen as a very positive experience for both students and tutors. They are not expensive to organise but they do take some time and effort. The benefits are many including enhanced learning for students and accompanying staff, greater engagement with assignment work and closer relationships with local businesses. As a result we would like to encourage more tutors to organise business trips, but would like to pass on some of the things we have learnt to make it easier for them.

Recommendations

A Model of How to Organise a Successful Business Trip

As a result of our experiences we have developed the following model to guide tutors of any discipline who wish to organise a trip for themselves.

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9. Evaluation  →  1. Contact organisations  →  2. Pre visit – Reconnaissance
                                                        ↓
8. Assessment                                     3. Devise assessment
      ↑                                                 ↓
7. Follow up and feedback                         4. Organise transport
      ↑                                                 ↓
6. Go on the visit  ←  5. Publish information to students  ←
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Earle and Thomas (2010)

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Other recommendations

Contact: Our experiences are that you need to contact many companies to ensure a handful of visits. About one in four initial contacts turn into a final visit. Dates can change and visits fall through so you need to have a good few organisations to call upon.

Reconnaissance: a reconnaissance visit is vital to establish relationships, agree objectives, set up assessment and check details like H&S.

Assessment: Business trips provide excellent opportunities for work related learning. Where possible, link visits with assessment to encourage a higher level of student engagement.

Travel, timing and meeting points: Arranging travel can be the most challenging part of organising a trip. Where possible organise local trips. Allow time to spend organising suitable transport, choosing meeting points and preparing clear directions for students. The timetabling of the trip is also a point to consider. Post graduate students prefer to give up own time rather than class time to go on trips whereas, undergraduates prefer to give up class time.

Student preparation: Student preparation is vital so that they make the most of the trip and maximise learning. They also need to be reminded frequently about the trip to ensure they turn up. After the trip follow up activities and class discussion reinforces student learning and understanding.

Staff presence: Staff should always accompany students on a visit to ensure good safe student behaviour, build relationships with the organisation being visited and iron out any problems occurring on the day. A register should be taken.

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<u>Appendix 1</u>

Company Visits Questionnaire

I would like to assess the usefulness of the organisational visits undertaken by students this academic year. Please could you spend five minutes completing this questionnaire and return it to me. If you did not attend a visit please complete questions one and two. If you have been on a visit please complete question one and three/ four.

Thank you, Veronica and Maria

Module studied:_____

Question 1 a) Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am happy to give up own time to go on a company visit				
I am happy to give up class time to go on a company visit			`	

1b) How would you rate the usefulness of the following: (please score each 1-5. 1 is low)

Lectures/ seminars _____

Organisational visits_____

Guest lecturers_____

Question 2) Please complete if you **did not** attend a visit or you missed a visit for any reason, otherwise go to question 3 over page.

2a) If you did not attend a visit, why not? (Please tick those that apply)

I was not given the opportunity_____

I did not want to go_____

I missed the trip (please state which trip you missed and give reason)_____

I did not attend for another reason (please state)_____

2b) Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would like to go on a company visit				
I don't see the point in going on a company visit			`	
I feel I missed out				

Question 3) Please complete if you attended a company visit. If you attended more than one visit then you can complete this question for the first visit and question four below for the second visit.

3a) Please state the organisation you visited:_____

3b) Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I found the trip enjoyable				
I found the trip useful in helping my understanding of the module subject			`	
I found the trip useful in helping me complete module assignment				
I found the trip useful in helping me prepare for my exam				
I found the trip useful in preparing for employment				

3c) How could the organisational visit be improved in the future?_____

_____

_____

Question 4) Please complete if you attended a second company visit.

4a) Please state the second organisation you visited:_____

4b) Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I found the trip enjoyable				
I found the trip useful in helping my understanding of the module subject			`	
I found the trip useful in helping me complete module assignment				
I found the trip useful in helping me prepare for my exam				
I found the trip useful in preparing for employment				

4c) How could the organisational visit be improved in the future?_____

_____

_____