

**CONNECTING TO HOTEL ICON: BUILDING ICONIC RESOURCES FROM
AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE WITH MULTI-DISCIPLINARY STUDENT
PROJECTS**

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ABSTRACT

Hotel ICON, the teaching and research hotel built for the School of Hotel and Tourism Management of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University opened in May 2011. In order to optimize the teaching and research facilities in the newly built teaching hotel, the School is leading a Project which connects the teaching hotel with other departments at the University including the Institute of Textile and Clothing, Applied Biology and Chemical Technology, the Department of Computing and the Educational Development Centre. The Project focuses on enabling authentic and collaborative multi-disciplinary learning experiences for students that will be built around the use of Hotel ICON. The main strategy to achieve this is through designing and developing an integrated series of multi-disciplinary student projects utilizing the teaching hotel. The student projects will in their turn be the means to develop accessible, authentic and reusable teaching resource banks for staff and students for teaching and learning and research opportunities. This paper reports and explains the ideas of this Project and its progress.

Key Words: multi-disciplinary projects, hospitality/tourism education, teaching hotel

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is a discipline which is not only based on theoretical foundations but requires intensive hands-on experience and knowledge from the actual working environment. Experiential learning has long been an approach used in hospitality and tourism education (Lau & Wong, 2010). While a solid theoretical underpinning in the principles that govern hotel management is fundamental, it is the application of these theories in practice that is not provided for in classroom learning alone. Work integrated learning, also referred to as experiential or active learning, is increasingly being recognized as the bridge between classroom learning and the practical application of theory in the workplace, and as a result is becoming a central feature in many academic courses around the globe, since experiential learning involves “learning by doing that reinforces classroom understanding by contextualizing knowledge” (Clark & Whitelegg, 1998; Solnet, Kralj, Kay, & DeVeau, 2009). According to Coco (2000), from 1980 to 2000, the ratio of graduates who completed an

internship rose dramatically, from one in thirty six students to three out of four students. This shows that educators in the hospitality field are aware of the importance of authentic working and learning experience in the industry environment, and encourage students to actively take part in practicum or internship placements during their studies. Authentic learning activities are designed “to incorporate the characteristics of real-life tasks” (Herrington & Oliver, 2000, p. 35). By participating in this kind of authentic learning , students can equip themselves with knowledge, skills and abilities and eventually ‘close the gap’ between what students are being taught in school and what the industry expects of them (Dopson & Tas, 2004; Moncarz & Kay, 2005).

Despite the noted trends in tourism education there still remains a concern about the mismatch between the education that students receive and the needs of the industry:

If graduates from tourism education are unable to apply their skills and knowledge to tourism management practice, if tourism management graduates are unable to satisfy the needs of the tourism industry, then tourism education is truly wasted. (Jia, Ayres, & Huyton, 2010, pp. 8-9)

This concern also extends to the curricula that students are taught: “Current tourism curricula can be seen as vocational, but the important point is that they are not rooted in day-to-day current operational practice of the tourism industry” (Airey & Tribe, 2005, p. 17) In order to address these kinds of concerns and provide tourism education that is grounded in real practice with the opportunity for students to work in the real life setting of an operational hotel before they graduate, some universities and hotel schools have purpose built teaching hotels and facilities.

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has built Hotel ICON, as a teaching and research hotel, for the University’s School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM). It opened in May 2011 and is located in Tsim Sha Tsui East with 262 fully-equipped guestrooms, 3 dining outlets, swimming pool, spa, health club, ballroom and conference

facilities. Hotel ICON will be a dedicated premises including a hotel conference and training centre and research and teaching facilities for the SHTM. The objective of establishing and operating the hotel is to further the development, promotion and advancement of hotel, hospitality and tourism management education and research in Hong Kong, to educate its students in the world's finest hotel environment which will be the launching pad for successful careers. (SHTM, 2009)

THE CONNECTING HOTEL ICON PROJECT

In response to this tremendous opportunity and large scale investment, SHTM in collaboration with other PolyU departments including the Educational Development Centre (EDC), the Institute of Textiles and Clothing (ITC); Applied Biology and Chemical Technology (ABCT) and the Department of Computing (COMP), made a proposal for a teaching development grant (TDG). The proposed Project, *“Connecting Hotel ICON: Developing multi-disciplinary experiences and reusable educational resources”* addresses the issue of making best use of the Hotel ICON as a teaching and research facility and maximizing return on investment. Funding of \$879,000HK was approved and the Project has now commenced. The key activities driving the Project are, as indicated by its title, creating “multi-disciplinary experiences” and “reusable educational resources”. In both cases these activities are learner-focused and aimed at developing the potential of the training hotel facility and its impact on PolyU students.

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

By taking a multi-disciplinary approach the Project is ensuring the engagement of departments other than SHTM in taking advantage of the hotel facilities for their students. The functioning and running of a hotel such as Hotel ICON is a complex operation requiring a large staff with varied skills and expertise. Important and valued graduate qualities worldwide are among others critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal and communication skills, and ability to work in teams. In order to develop students who can

“think outside of the box” we have to break down some of the dividing academic barriers and widen the fields of vision beyond disciplinary silos. Real life experiences are often messy and not neatly compartmentalised as an academic course may be.

Over the past decade, many scholars and researchers have suggested multi-disciplinary, or ideally inter-disciplinary study, can enrich learning experiences and provide a channel for students to broaden their knowledge and skills (Kruck & Teer, 2009; Sager, Fernández, & Thursby, 2006). Nowadays, this has become a trend in many tertiary education institutions, which aim to provide different kinds of cross, inter or multi-disciplinary courses and programs in their curriculum, although in the hotel and hospitality field there is little research on these approaches to education. PolyU’s current strategic plan (2008/9-2011/12) endorses the goal and value of multi-disciplinary studies and there is commitment to working towards providing such opportunities. It states intent to:

To develop and implement a plan to offer undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes in selected multi-disciplinary areas, by first identifying areas for such development and then facilitating collaboration across departments. (PolyU Strategic Planning Committee, 2008, p. 10)

It is anticipated that the Hotel ICON Project may pave the way for the development of such multi-disciplinary programmes.

CONCEPTS OF MULTI-DISCIPLINARITY

An academic discipline has been defined as ‘a branch of learning or scholarly instruction’ (Apostel, Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, & Paris Centre for Educational Research Innovation, 1972), but this definition does not clearly explain what ‘a branch’ is. Roper & Brookes (1999) conclude disciplines are both structure of knowledge or content and a social organization. There has to be some consensus among people in the same discipline and they have their own aims, body of concepts, methods and social organization. This specific group of academics and students who study in the same discipline

become an academic “tribe” (Becher, 1989). Davies & Devlin (2010) further explain disciplines are generally considered more discrete than ‘field of study’, as discipline experts and universities provide a framework for students by setting out a ‘field’ of study. Multi-disciplinarity recognises that there are many discrete and autonomous disciplines. In terms of research, in some areas of investigation there may be multi-disciplinary contributions from several discipline areas to a joint research program. In practice, each of the disciplines contributes from its own perspective. In both a practical and intellectual sense, each of the disciplines stands alone. Multi-disciplinarity is simply the co-existence of a number of disciplines (Davies & Devlin, 2010). Barry (1997) also points out that multi-disciplinary refers to “different disciplines involved in the same task and working alongside each of them but functioning independently.” Multi-disciplinary does not imply any particular commitment to collaborative work or a common understanding of the professional standards of the disciplines involved. In simple words, a multi-disciplinary project is a project that involves more than one discipline and works in parallel in a specific field of study. In the Hotel ICON Project, the hotel itself is used as a platform for different faculties to extend their knowledge to a hotel environment and give a chance to students to experience how to apply their expertise to the hotel industry.

This Project’s main strategy is to initiate a series of linked multi-disciplinary student projects. While SHTM is the key School in the integration of the Hotel ICON teaching facility to PolyU’s systems and mission, the expertise from EDC, ABCT, ITC and COMP in education, food, textile industries and technology will also contribute greatly to the richness of the educational experience realised through the teaching hotel. It is projected that through such collaborative work utilizing the Hotel ICON facilities as a focal point and a real hotel in operation, very authentic experiences can be achieved. Students will be able to work towards specific subject learning outcomes but within a shared learning and teaching context that will be both innovative and challenging.

BUILDING REUSABLE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

By stressing reusable educational resources the Project is supporting a sustainable approach to the educational environment provided by the hotel, and that different cohorts of students and different staff will benefit from the work and effort of others over the years. A principal outcome of the multi-disciplinary student projects will be discipline specific and subject-centred resources in fabrics, food safety and technology. These resources banks will be both real artefacts stored in the Resource Centre of the hotel and will be classified and presented in a digital form. It is anticipated that the Project will be able to utilise and add to a database constructed by an earlier PolyU project led by the Department of Building and Real Estate (BRE) and involving Building Services Engineering (BSE) and Civil and Structural Engineering (CSE). This BRE project has documented and collated many documents, photographs and multimedia materials relating to the whole process of building the Hotel ICON with the intention of providing access to authentic materials for student study and research. With the addition of the SHTM Project resources documenting the hotel in use, the complete database will be a valuable and holistic source of information on Hotel ICON from conception to opening and running. It has relevance and potential learning and teaching applications for many different departments and disciplines at PolyU, all of which may be linked in complex and various ways to the entity of the teaching hotel and its activities.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN DIFFERENT HOTEL SCHOOLS

In order to have a better idea about how other hotel schools or universities with teaching hotels make use of their facilities, three interviews were conducted with the Hyatt Regency Hong Kong Sha Tin Hotel (The Chinese University of Hong Kong), Pousada de Mong-Há (Institute for Tourism Studies, Macau) and Skotel the training and study hotel (Hotelschool The Hague, Holland). Background information about their teaching facilities is shown below:

Hyatt Regency Hong Kong Sha Tin Hotel (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

The Chinese University of Hong Kong provides the land for the hotel, comprising 567 guestrooms; the hotel was built by the New World Group and is managed by the Hyatt group. Linked with the Cheng Yu Tung Building where the School of Hotel and Tourism is located and most of the teaching and learning activities happen, Hyatt Learning Centre has teaching facilities and a mock front desk (direct copy of the Hyatt Regency) for students. The school uses the Hyatt standard as a benchmark to teach the students. Although the existing hotel is basically a commercial enterprise and teaching and learning activities for students are separated from the operating hotel, still some of the learning and teaching activities happen in the hotel area (e.g. site visits, internships).

Pousada de Mong-Há (Institute for Tourism Studies, Macau)

Originally an enlisted quarter for Portuguese soldiers, the premises housing the teaching hotel was reconstructed in the late 70s and became a government guesthouse. In 1995 the Institute for Tourism Studies was established and it became a training unit of the school and opened to the public. Freshmen have their training in the mock teaching facilities, but all hotel management students have to do “Work Assignment” in the Pousada de Mong-Há and really run the training hotel by themselves. Besides, the training hotel also provides certain part-time job opportunities for students who would like to work. Since it is only a small hotel with 20 rooms, students who work in the hotel are involved in all kind of activities in a daily operation. As the interviewee, says, “it provides a one-man-band experience for students who really work here; it’s a stepping stone for them to prepare for the industry environment.”

Skotel the training and study hotel (Hotelschool The Hague, Holland)

Skotel is the training hotel of the Hotelschool The Hague, and has training hotels in both Amsterdam and The Hague. The students work at the reception and in housekeeping in the Skotel and this provides valuable practical experience in Rooms Division. New students

following practicals perform the basic skills, while the more senior students fulfil the leadership role and actually manage the practical students under the supervision of an instructor of the school (Hotelschool The Hague, 2011). Students will rotate from different outlets (front desk, food and beverages, housekeeping) to let them have a clear picture on how different departments work. In this way they can make a good decision when they need to find a placement in the industry, because the Skotel does not offer placement places for their students.

Table 1 - Learning and Teaching Activities in Teaching Hotels

	Mass Lecture	Work Integrate Education	Research	Observation/ Field Trip	Internship Placement	Laboratory Sessions
Hotel ICON	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hyatt Regency			✓	✓	✓	
Pousada de Mong-Há		✓		✓		✓
Skotel		✓		✓		✓

The table of activities shows that the Hotel ICON has a more comprehensive range of activities offered through its teaching hotel than reported by other institutions in interviews (April 2011)

PROJECT PLAN

The Hotel ICON Project is strongly located in some of PolyU's declared areas of strategic focus (ASFs) e.g. Hospitality and Tourism Management, Fashion and Textiles, and Smart Materials and Systems. It is also clearly broadly aligned with PolyU's strategic objectives in providing "a holistic education which is outcome-based, work-integrated, professionally and globally-oriented, and student-centred" (PolyU Strategic Planning Committee, 2008, p. 6). The PolyU investment in Hotel ICON is already a commitment towards achieving this objective, particularly for SHTM, in providing an ideal physical location for such education to be authentically situated and conducted. The Project builds on this commitment by focusing on enabling educational applications and activities that could make the hotel an exemplar of innovative and applied education in Asia.

One of the Hotel ICON's guest floors will feature prototype guest rooms purposely built to facilitate research into different areas, such as room design, environmental safety and management, new products and technology, and service concept development. The proposed experimental floor has the potential to be a bridge between different discipline communities within PolyU as well as promoting industrial partnerships. It will offer a platform to develop, test and showcase innovative technologies, and design and business concepts.

IDEAS FOR MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROJECTS

It is envisaged that through the Hotel ICON Project that students will work in multi-disciplinary teams and be engaged in creative and critical thinking while working towards shared goals and learning outcomes. This can provide a rich learning environment for acquiring professional knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as developing desired generic graduate qualities such as abilities to work in teams, managing interpersonal relationships, communication skills and leadership. Figure 1 displays a flowchart of the initial ideas on the multi-disciplinary student projects development.

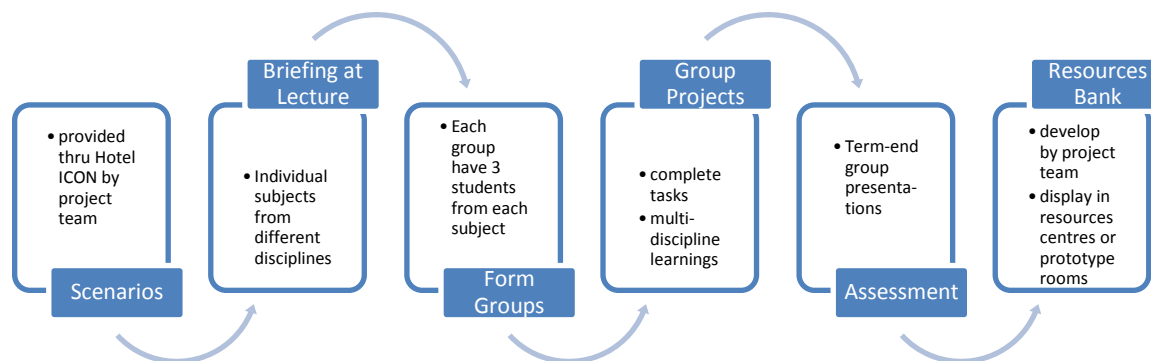


Figure 1 - Multi-disciplinary Student Projects Development

Figure 1 can be illustrated by using a possible collaboration of ITC and SHTM in the following example. In the process of hotel facilities design and management, there are many guidelines, and also opportunities for creativity and innovation. Students from ITC and SHTM can work together towards a common term project. In this case, ITC students taking Textile Materials and SHTM students taking Hospitality Facilities Management and Design can form groups to work on the same project. A group can have three students from each discipline. Initially, scenarios are provided through the Hotel ICON. Teachers from both subjects will provide introductory briefing to all students. ITC students would then learn and appreciate the process of hotel design; while SHTM students would understand more on technologies on fabrics and material applicable to hotel design. Based on the given scenario, students of different disciplines would need to work together stage by stage to complete the tasks required guided by the templates and resources available from the project. Students from different groups can work on projects including "Functional study of bedding material for sleeping comfort", "Effect of colour on the ambience of hotel room", or "Use of nano-technology in textiles for the hotel industry". ITC students could be asked to focus on the material collection, testing and development; while SHTM students design linen, bedding, carpets, and dining room materials. The prototype rooms in Hotel ICON can be a suitable

testing environment. There would be a term-end presentation by each group to demonstrate their designs. Teachers from ITC and SHTM would both assess their students independently. The material tested and collected by ITC students will be arranged and further developed into a resource bank to be displayed in the resources centres in Hotel ICON and ITC. The resources bank can also be accessed by other departments and the industry representatives in the future.

Although the Project team would like to further achieve an interdisciplinary learning environment for the SHTM students and students from other departments with different profession, as it is the preliminary stage of the project, multi-disciplinary involvement is a necessary precondition to interdisciplinary efforts (Skinner, 2001). A multi-disciplinary team approach serves the purpose of letting the students fit into the environment more easily as it is discipline oriented, with all professionals working parallel and with clear role definitions, specified tasks and hierarchical lines of authority (Mirjam, 2010). The Project team plans to conduct three pilot projects over 2 semesters and there will be ongoing evaluation throughout the whole Project. There will be student project evaluation, reflective staff workshops and based on the result of the project evaluation, the Project team will also fine tune and redesign the pilot student projects for the next semester.

Moreover, through such collaboration, resource banks for fabrics, food and technology related to the hotel facilities and catering issues will be developed as a result of the student projects. Such resource banks do not exist currently in the field of hotel studies. Students not only benefit from getting new resources, but also by engaging in an authentic environment through interactions with peers and existing experts in other disciplines. On the other hand, students from other disciplines could also have a chance to access resources which are from a real hotel setup, instead of using textbook examples; the authentic resource bank will surely enrich the learning experience. Besides, the resource banks will also be the prerequisite of the potential interdisciplinary classes or courses which may be developed by the university in the future.

Academic staff also stand to benefit from the bringing together of a range of different expertise and the insights gained from the multiple perspectives that will arise through the devising and facilitation of the student projects. They will participate in documenting and distilling the lessons learned from the project as a whole and contribute to a teaching and learning toolkit for the use of Hotel ICON as teaching and research facility for PolyU, featuring guidance on the creation and facilitation of good practice multi-disciplinary and authentic learning experiences. PolyU's Educational Development Centre (EDC) works with the Project providing advice and assistance with learning design, pedagogy and educational technology. After the pilot classes, the EDC will also assist in planning the post project strategies for learning and teaching with Hotel ICON. Figure 2 illustrated the interaction mechanism of different parties involved in this Project. Different faculties and departments will be involved in different kinds of interactions, provide input to the Project and at the same time also benefit from the interaction by learning more from the authentic environment. The student projects will become valuable resources for the multi-disciplinary resource bank while the EDC will provide support on developing teaching and learning toolkits and pedagogical advice.

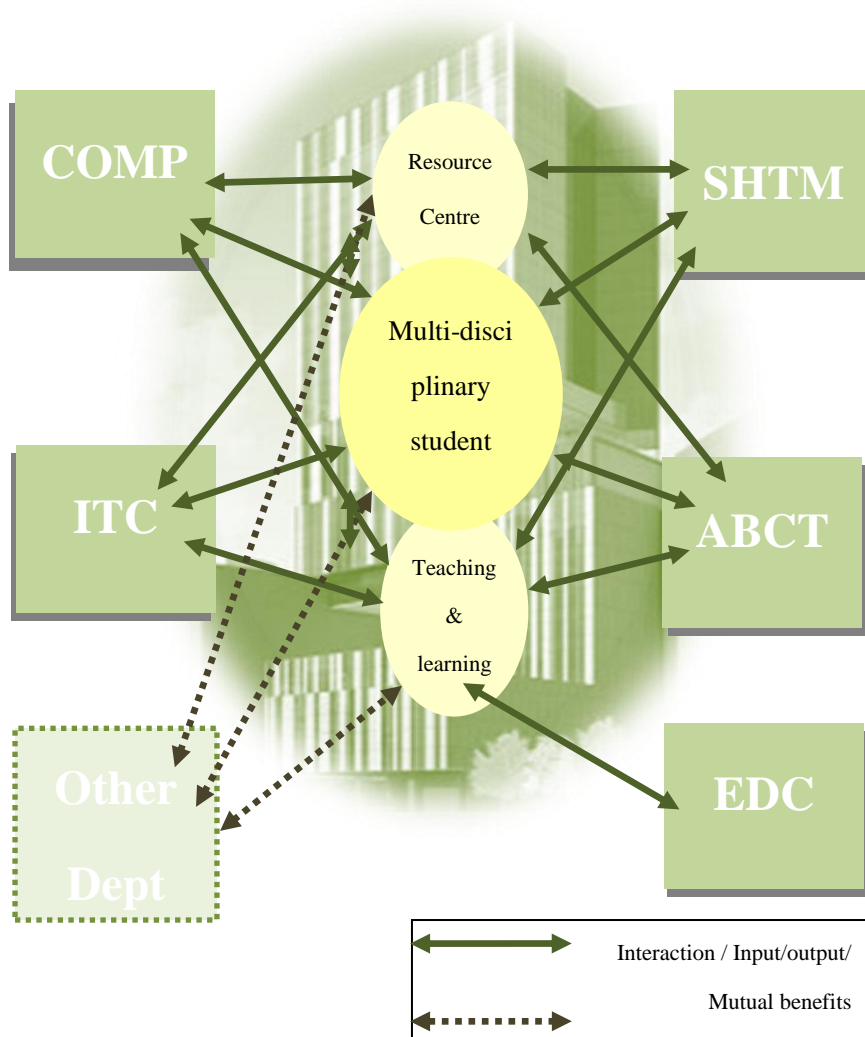


Figure 2 - Interaction of the Project

PILOT STUDIES

The Project team spent five months on feasibility research and planning on different classes offered by SHTM which could work with the other departments involved in the Project. After certain classes were selected, the Project team had to design the student projects and topics for their students to work in the hotel environment. The intended purpose was to establish and explore opportunities of knowledge exchange among students of various disciplines so as to achieve each of the intended learning outcomes of their respective study programs. The first pilot student project was started in the second academic semester of

2010-2011. Figure 3 can show the resources building process of pilot studies with ABCT students.

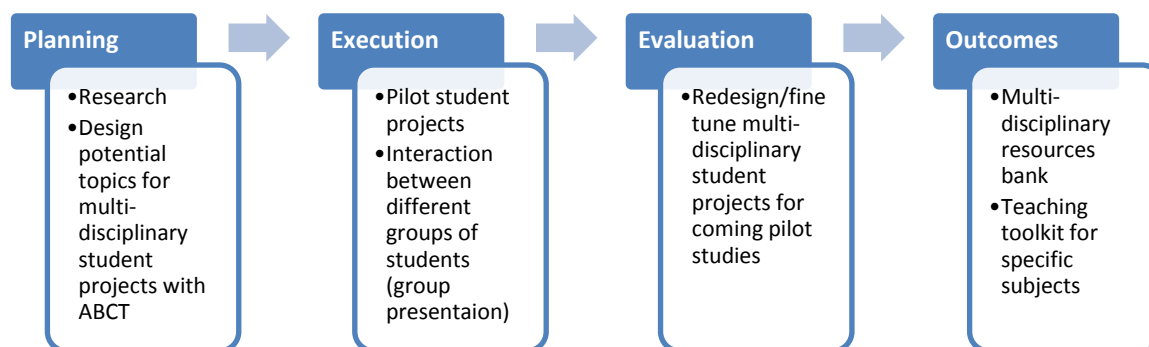


Figure 3 - Process of Resources Building from Pilot Studies with ABCT Students

The training on the catering service in the hotel industry from the programme of SHTM and the generic knowledge of the Food Safety Programme of ABCT form a synergistic platform for expertise exchange and communication. Opportunities in the form of safety evaluation and food preparation practice were created and established for students of both disciplines. Students of food science had the opportunities in HACCP planning on one of the food preparations from the assigned menus for the “Food and Beverage Operation” Classes of SHTM. Visits at the Food production laboratory during class hours were arranged. A series of sampling activities, observations, and interviews were done. Microbial tests on the collected samples were carried out within 24 hours after collection.

Industrial methods and standards were adopted in carrying out the procedures on sampling and tests. Inspections on personal hygiene, focusing on hand washing practice and efficiencies were done. Environmental safety of the kitchen was also assessed. In this pilot study, students of both disciplines followed their respective professional requirements in their deliveries. Students of the food discipline had a chance in drawing theoretical knowledge into actual on site evaluation, drawing GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) and HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) plans on actual food preparations scenarios. Those

of the hotel industry also had a chance to acquire a better understanding and experience of the industrial requirement of the catering service. Additional goals and activities such as pre-class discussion, open sharing forums, follow up interviews and progress monitoring, might have been achieved if given more time and preparation before the pilot study was launched. Communication was bound to be a problem while staff members were busy with administrations and in-house organizations in moving into this newly completed teaching hotel. It leaves room for improvement. Yet, it should be appreciated that so much was involved and achieved through the effort of various parties that add to the team's valuable experience.

SUMMARY

Multi-disciplinary learning will be achieved primarily through designing and developing an integrated series of multi-disciplinary student projects to utilize the potential of Hotel ICON, as an authentic learning environment. The objective of developing accessible, authentic and reusable teaching resource banks for staff and students for teaching, learning and research opportunities will be an outcome of the primary activity of creating multi-disciplinary collaboration and teaching and learning experience through the design and implementation of the student projects. Discipline specific and subject-centered resources will be generated (which also have intrinsic value), but the whole Project is dedicated to the hotel industry where Hotel ICON is the convergent centre. Future collaborations with other departments of PolyU can be further extended and developed through the interactions. Bringing together in an authentic and holistic way the many different disciplines that may be involved in the construction, design, development, management and maintenance of a hotel such as Hotel ICON benefits both the university and the industry.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Mr. Murray Mackenzie, Mr. Tony Chu, Mrs. Lily Kwong, Mr. Tommy Kwok, Dr. K.P. Ho, Miss Y.K. Wong, Miss Yuen Cheuk Yin, Miss Tse Pik Ha and Miss Wong Wing Man of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University for the kind support in the pilot project.