



Evaluation of the Edge Hotel School

Final report

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The **Edge** Foundation

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All photos courtesy of Edge Hotel School and Wivenhoe House students, staff and industry partners.



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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The Edge Foundation has commissioned the UCL Institute of Education to conduct an evaluation of the Edge Hotel School (EHS), a collaboration between the Edge Foundation and the University of Essex which has been operating since 2012. The EHS provides a unique model of integrated practically-based higher education, enabling students to obtain foundation or honours degrees in hospitality and events management while working alongside industry professionals in an on-site 4-star country house commercial hotel. The central focus of this evaluation has been to explore how the EHS model combines the development of theoretical and practical knowledge and skills through an action-based learning approach and to identify wider implications and lessons to be learnt for industry-engaged education. The evaluation has also sought to identify perceived challenges, key achievements and future developments envisaged by stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

The research was based on a case study methodology, using qualitative interviews (individually and through focus groups), participation at key events and analysis of a range of documents. We also undertook contextual research to identify other examples of practically-based higher education in the UK and internationally, both in the hospitality field and beyond. Field research was conducted between September 2019 and April 2020, involving two site visits to the University of Essex campus and Wivenhoe House Hotel for individual and group interviews, as well as additional telephone interviews and conversations with key stakeholders at key events.

Altogether, interviews were carried out with 8 staff members at the EHS, Wivenhoe House Hotel and the University of Essex, 28 current students or recent graduates of the EHS, as well as senior staff members of the Edge Foundation and a hospitality company collaborating with the EHS through a range of industry engagement activities. Interviews were based on written informed consent, including for audio-recording. The interviews were subsequently summary-transcribed for thematic analysis to inform this report.

KEY FINDINGS

The Edge Hotel School (EHS) was set up in 2011 and opened to students in 2012, as a joint undertaking by the University of Essex and the Edge Foundation. It was initially run by an independent higher education provider (Kaplan Open Learning), before functioning as a limited company from 2014 to 2018, set up by the key stakeholders (with representatives from the Edge Foundation, the University of Essex and Wivenhoe House Hotel). Since the 2018/19 academic year the EHS has officially become a department of the University of Essex.

The impetus for developing an innovative practically-based model of higher education in the hospitality field arose from the Edge Foundation's vision for a more flexible and dynamic higher education landscape promoting work readiness. A key and unique aspect of the school is the embedded practical experience at Wivenhoe House Hotel (WHH), an 18th Century listed building run as a country house hotel at the edge of the University of Essex campus, owned and managed through the university as a subsidiary company. WHH offers students the opportunity to study and train in a real-life fully commercial 4-star hotel setting. The EHS set-up remains unique to this day as a model of continuous and integrated practically-based higher education provision in the hospitality field.

A distinctive aspect of the EHS programme is its model of two-year accelerated degrees (in hotel management and events management respectively). This model offers the same volume of theoretical and practical learning experience while allowing students to save on tuition fees and graduate more quickly than in traditional three-year degrees. Since 2019/2020, the EHS has also started offering three-year degrees (with a four-year option combined with study abroad). The two models have distinct characteristics, attracting a wider and more diverse student cohort:

Two-year accelerated degree	Three-year degree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practical learning rotations at WHH include shifts over Christmas/New Year and other holiday times ● More intensive weekly schedules, e.g. approximately 6 weeks of holiday period per year, similar to many employment contexts ● Overall lower total tuition fees and earlier graduation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More traditional academic term times with longer study break periods and less intensive weekly lecture scheduled ● Four-year option (including international placement) ● Open to international students requiring a Tier 4 visa as well as home/EU students who prefer a less intensive course

All courses follow the same basic structure in terms of academic and work-based practical learning objectives through level 4 (operative practical skills / mainly tutor-led activities), Level 5 (supervisory skills in the hotel / more self-directed learning and reflective capacities) and Level 6 (managerial skills / focus on independent and critically-evaluative learning including through consultancy project).

Within the practical learning elements, the EHS concept distinguishes itself from further education programmes focusing on craft-specific operative skills by supporting students to develop strategic and managerial skills *through* the experience of carrying out key operative roles at the hotel. The focus is on building the experiential foundations required to develop well-rounded strategic and professional perspectives which allow students to appreciate hotel management in action and to critically engage with this experience, supporting them to be ‘industry-ready’ at graduation. A high level of industry engagement is built into the courses, through guest lectures, scholarships, events and conferences, the consultancy project at level 6 and a very prominent industry presence at the university career fair.

The EHS concept has been reformed and refined over the years since its inception, while the school itself has undergone extensive organisational and structural change. The most significant recent change has been the transition of the EHS into a department of the University of Essex, which had hitherto been a closely involved partner. This enabled the recruitment of international students, allowed the EHS to recruit students to its full capacity and placed the programme on a more long term financially viable footing. EHS staff and students have access to a wider range of resources, services and development opportunities. For the university, the EHS has provided a ‘ready-made’ response (with a proven track record) to key current demands for innovation in the higher education landscape.

Key points of innovation represented by the EHS include:

1. an integrated model of action-based learning offering a distinct form of continuous, hands-on exposure to real-life workplace practices in a fully commercial hotel. The model supports educational processes of *boundary crossing*, which allow students to apply skills, reflect on practice and integrate academic and work-based learning on an ongoing basis. This embedded learning supports a sense of professionalism among students which puts them in an advantageous position upon graduation.

2. An ethos of industry engagement which runs through the whole of the programme, facilitated by a long-term commitment to industry relationships. This supports students to develop highly relevant networks, access to experiences and opportunities and helps them envisage their future career paths.
3. The accelerated two-year degree model has been a pioneering and distinct feature at the core of the EHS offer, offering not only savings in terms of duration and fees, but also promoting a focused, motivated, mature and responsible approach to higher education learning.
4. The partnership between the Edge Foundation as an independent educational charity and the EHS is in itself perceived as an innovation, with the former acting as a champion for flexible and industry-engaged higher education through action-based learning approaches.

From an industry perspective, the EHS model is seen as filling a gap of practically-based higher hospitality education. Graduates are considered to demonstrate high levels of resilience alongside strong academic performance, supporting them to become 'rounded' professional personalities. The interplay of rigorous academic study and embedded real-life work experience throughout their course is considered as a key factor promoting this resilience, as well as a professional attitude.

Students appreciate the highly personalised levels of support for learning in both academic and work-based contexts. Academic staff are described as approachable and very knowledgeable, with a wealth of direct industry experience alongside academic expertise. Students feel inspired by this and value the benefits of industry networks as opportunities for realising their own professional goals and ambitions. The practical learning opportunities in the hotel are appreciated above all for the direct contact with customers it affords, exposing students to ongoing feedback (both positive and negative) while allowing them to experience work in all hotel departments. The hotel simultaneously represents a real life context and a protected learning space, allowing room for improving practice and learning through mistakes. In contrast, work experience placements in industry are considered valuable for networking and as stepping stones for future opportunities, but this also means more pressure to perform and leave a positive impression. Some students expressed concerns that increased student intakes, while making the programme more financially sustainable, might diminish the highly personalised experience they have enjoyed for future cohorts.

The programme is overwhelmingly described as a success by stakeholders interviewed, but as for any process of innovation, the EHS has encountered some challenges. In turn, these have prompted various reforms, refinements and new development opportunities. Establishing an innovative programme with diverse stakeholders and bringing it to success within a short period of time requires careful management of the complexities involved in the partnership. This includes balancing the requirements of two sets of customers - not compromising on the customer experience of the fully commercial hotel, while providing a successful and enriching learning environment for students as (highly) paying customers of higher education institutions. This places high demands on hotel staff who deal with frequently rotating groups of often inexperienced students, while the EHS strives to achieve a level of parity of learning opportunities in a setting of limited size and capacity. One solution to this challenge

has been master classes on key hospitality skills for larger groups of students. Our research took place before the most recent challenges brought by Covid-19 and its significant impact on the hospitality industry, making these balancing acts even more difficult for the EHS. The EHS has been developing contingency arrangements to manage any further impact of Covid-19. In particular, the EHS has been embracing digital means to sustain both student and industry engagement.

Similarly, the programme's success in attracting higher student numbers has made accommodating real-life practical learning opportunities for more students in the hotel more challenging, leading to concerns among some participants that scaling up might dilute some of its key practical learning benefits. Some further ideas of innovation to address this have been to allow events management students to undertake some of their practical learning experience with external agencies. However, from the perspective of the EHS the embedded learning experience within the hotel remains the key factor setting the programme apart and maintaining this as a focus is a priority.

A further challenge has been the organisational change involved in the EHS transitioning into a university department. Maintaining its distinct character in the context of joining a large and often bureaucratic institution is seen as important by stakeholders. Its strong industry relations as well as its relationship with the Edge Foundation as an independent champion of innovative models of practically-based higher education are seen as important safeguards of this distinctiveness, and stakeholders are optimistic that there are mutual learning and development benefits for both the EHS and the wider university.

CONCLUSIONS AND WIDER IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICALLY-BASED AND INDUSTRY-ENGAGED HIGHER EDUCATION MODELS

From the perspective of stakeholders interviewed for the research, based on its 8-year journey so far, the EHS model offers several key learning points:

- The programme showcases the success of a 'learning by doing' or action-based¹ learning approach, informed by industry-engagement. This provides students with clear perspectives, motivation as well as highly relevant knowledge and skills for the transition from academic study to work. At a time when students are paying customers of higher education, incurring substantial debt as part of their academic journey, facilitating this transition into employment becomes a key responsibility of higher education institutions.
- The highly integrated nature of the EHS model provides extensive opportunities for students to synthesise and consolidate academic and practical learning by applying their knowledge and skills to a real-life context. The programme supports students in developing not only an academic, but also a professional identity even before they graduate. This is particularly important in a sector which is

1. We acknowledge a degree of conceptual overlap between the terms 'learning by doing', 'practically-based education' and 'action-based learning'. In this report, we refer to practically-based higher education as an overall term for programmes containing a significant amount of practical learning opportunities and sites, in contrast to those purely based on theoretical classroom-based learning or independent study. Action-based learning and 'learning by doing' have been used synonymously by participants of this research, denoting methodological approaches to learning within the programme (see also Section 3.2).

as highly dependent on professionalism as hospitality, where the needs and requirements of learning contexts have to be reconciled with delivering customer focused products. Similar issues exist for other service-based sectors.

- The practical learning experiences in the EHS model provide opportunities for students to appreciate the highly diversified and specialised range of professional roles in the sector vis-à-vis core (and transferable) skills at higher education and managerial levels. The crossovers, interdependencies and intersections between specialised and transferable skills are particularly important in vocationally-oriented disciplines. The EHS enables students to appreciate and experience processes of boundary crossing between education and work which for many graduates only happen after they enter the world of work. This makes models such as the EHS highly relevant to programmes in other disciplines and professions, particularly those with a service focus.
- The programme's journey also highlights the importance of careful balancing, managing and involvement of key stakeholders as part of processes of innovation. The complexities involved in setting up, refining and sustaining a new and dynamic concept and the role of relationships of organisations and people within them are not to be underestimated. The EHS model provides valuable insights into how such partnerships can be kept synergetic and effective.



Introduction

This report provides key findings for the evaluation of the Edge Hotel School's higher education provision, delivered through collaboration with the University of Essex.

The Edge Hotel School (EHS) started as a collaboration between the Edge Foundation and the University of Essex in 2011/12, operating independently in different configurations, including as a limited company, until formally becoming a department of the University of Essex part way through the 2018/19 academic year. The provision was set up as a unique model of integrated practically-based higher education, enabling students to obtain foundation or honours degrees while working alongside industry professionals in a 4-star country house commercial hotel.

The Edge Foundation has commissioned the UCL Institute of Education to conduct an evaluation of the EHS. The central focus of this evaluation has been to explore how the EHS model combines the development of theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in contextually relevant curricula through an action-based learning approach. A particular question was how structural and operational changes and demands have shaped and refined the model since its inception. The evaluation also aims to identify wider implications, aspects of innovation and lessons to be learnt from this model for

the development of industry-engaged higher education curricula (within hospitality and other fields). Specifically, the report highlights the ways in which this model supports ‘work-readiness’ among graduates through equipping them not only with relevant academic knowledge but also with practical employment and employability skills required for professional and industry success. More broadly, this evaluation also aims to support the thematic work being undertaken by the Edge Foundation on the preparation of young people for the world of work, facilitating the links between academic studies and practical experience and situating practice-based education in the higher education landscape.

The evaluation focuses on the following points:

- Key characteristics and distinctive features of the EHS concept, focusing on its role as an innovative model in the UK higher educational landscape based on learning through a combination of academic study and practical experience.
- Wider implications that can be learnt from this model for the development of industry-engaged higher education curricula that support ‘work-readiness’ among graduates through equipping them both with relevant academic knowledge and practical employment and employability skills required for industry success.
- Successful approaches and good practice which support students to participate in the cultural contexts of work-places as a way of learning and appreciate the way in which theory is embedded in practical activities.

As part of addressing the above key points, the research has explored perceptions of the EHS by different stakeholders, investigating how the EHS prepares graduates for work and how the partnerships and collaborations at the heart of the model (involving the Edge Hotel School, the University of Essex, Wivenhoe House Hotel, the Edge Foundation and networks with industry partners) have evolved over time. A further focus has been on the interplay of theory and practice in the delivery of specialised curricula for the hospitality and event management degrees offered and on the nature and extent of industry engagement throughout the programme. The evaluation has also sought to identify perceived challenges, key achievements and future developments envisaged by stakeholders.

Methodology

The research was based on a case study methodology, using qualitative interviews (individually and through focus groups), participation at key events and analysis of a range of documents (including previous reports by external agencies, such as assessments by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education). We also undertook contextual research to identify other examples of practically-based higher education in the UK and internationally, both in the hospitality field and beyond.

CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

Our contextual research involved preliminarily informal phone conversations and email communication with members of the EHS leadership team, a visit to attend the Edge Hotel School's open day as well as analysis of a range of documents and web-based publications. During the open day we were able to participate in a tour of the hotel alongside interested prospective students and their parents, led by current EHS students on work-based learning rotation at Wivenhoe House Hotel. We also had opportunity to participate in other open day events, including a key note presentation by a member of the EHS leadership team, followed by further conversations that helped us gain familiarity with the context and concept of the EHS.

Our contextual analysis of documents and web-based publications included a range of sources, including:

- the EHS and Edge Foundation websites
- promotional material for the courses offered
- module descriptions
- the EHS Student Handbook
- the EHS Learning and Teaching Strategy 2018-2021
- the EHS student journey and outcomes by level document (2019)
- a number of internal documents relating to the development and operation of the EHS from 2014 to 2018, such as principal's reports, action plans and business strategy
- a 2014 report on the EHS Curriculum Model for the University Vocational Awards Council, authored by the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester
- a 2015 reflective review report on the development and operation of EHS written by its principal
- reports by the Quality Assurance Agency on the Edge Hotel School Ltd from 2016, 2017 and 2018

Furthermore, we conducted a basic contextual review considering a range of higher education models and programmes focusing on: examples of innovative schemes in the area of industry-engaged education both in the UK and internationally; the landscape of hospitality education degrees within the UK; as well as key examples of hotel schools internationally.

FIELD RESEARCH

Field research was conducted through two site visits to the Edge Hotel School, the University of Essex and Wivenhoe House Hotel in October and December 2019; through attendance of a key network event (for students, alumni and industry representatives) in February 2020 and through further telephone interviews in March and April 2020.

As part of our research, we had the opportunity to carry out interviews with:

- five staff members of the Edge Hotel School (including from the leadership team), as well as a University of Essex academic leadership member
- two staff members with management responsibility at the Wivenhoe House Hotel
- a senior staff member at the Edge Foundation
- a senior staff member of a hospitality company collaborating with the EHS through a range of industry engagement activities (a further interview with an industry representative had been planned but could not be carried out within the required timescale due to the impact of Covid-19 measures on the hospitality sector)
- 27 current students and one recent graduate of the various degree programmes (hospitality, hotel and events management; in both two- and three- year delivery modes, across various levels and years of study), interviewed in four focus groups

In addition to this, we had the opportunity to have informal conversations with alumni and industry representatives at the EHS networking event. For full interviews, topic guides (please see Appendix 2) were developed based on the key research aims for the evaluation alongside issues emerging from our contextual analysis. Ethical considerations were taken into account, such as awareness of potentially sensitive topics and questions as well as respect for privacy and anonymity of participants. Interviews were based on written informed consent, including for audio-recording. The interviews were subsequently summary-transcribed for thematic analysis to inform this report.

Findings

3.1 CONTEXT AND MAIN FEATURES OF THE EDGE HOTEL SCHOOL CONCEPT

The Edge Hotel School (EHS) was set up as a joint undertaking by the University of Essex and the Edge Foundation. The impetus for developing an innovative practically-based model of higher education in the hospitality field arose from the Edge Foundation's vision for a more flexible and dynamic higher education landscape which helps prepare young people for the real world. The EHS was initially run by an independent higher education provider (Kaplan Open Learning), before functioning as a limited company set up by the key stakeholders (with representatives from the Edge Foundation, the University of Essex and Wivenhoe House Hotel). Since the 2018/19 academic year, the EHS has officially become a department of the University of Essex.

A key and unique aspect of the school is the embedded practical experience at Wivenhoe House Hotel (WHH), an 18th Century listed building run as a country house hotel at the edge of the University of Essex campus in Colchester, owned and managed through the university as a subsidiary company. WHH is not a training hotel but a real-life fully commercial 4-star hotel setting. However, the fact that some "staff" at the hotel are students of the University of Essex is not hidden from customers. At the time when the EHS was set up, it was the only UK-based hotel school of this kind. Our consideration of other models of higher education in hospitality and other fields indicates that the EHS remains unique in its set-up and operation to this day as a model of continuous and integrated practice-based higher education provision in the hospitality field. Reflecting on this, a senior staff member at the Edge Foundation emphasises the high degree of a continuous interdependence between the school and the hotel, which fosters the interplay between theoretical and practical learning.

The real uniqueness is the integration of the practical and the applied. The hotel and the school - they are absolutely symbiotic, they cannot exist without each other, and therefore, what they deliver is totally integrated [...] you have your academic knowledge in your lectures and seminars, you are then in the hotel doing it for real, applying it and then refining it - it's a kind of learn, reflect, redress kind of cycle going on ... [Senior staff member, Edge Foundation].

A further distinctive aspect in the set-up of the EHS was its pioneering role in offering a two-year accelerated degree model, involving savings in terms of duration and fees for students while offering the same volume of theoretical and practical learning experience. The EHS currently offers foundation and BA degrees in Hotel Management and in Events Management with Hospitality as accelerated courses. Since the start of the academic year 2019/20, there are the additional options of three year degrees (or four years including a year of study or placement abroad) in Hospitality Management and Events Management, alongside the accelerated degrees. The three- and four-year options are also open to international students, and 7 had been recruited at the time of the field research for this report (approximately 10% of the overall intake cohort for the academic year 2019/2020).

The EHS's vision is to 'champion an innovative approach to delivering excellence in vocational higher education' (EHS, 2018, p.1). A key element of this is a commitment to industry-engaged education across the school's internal, embedded and external activities and development areas. This includes, on the one hand, the practical work-based learning taking place during students' rotations at Wivenhoe House Hotel, but on the other hand it extends across a range of activities and events, such as workshops and masterclasses, guest lectures by industry experts, industry field trips and conferences, industry-engaged consultancy experience, as well as a high level of personalised support on industry-relevant networking skills and activities. The EHS also prides itself on attracting a very prominent representation of industry partners at the university careers fair (approximately 40 out of 100 stall-holders and presenters for the whole university).

There are some notable differences between the accelerated and three- year degree models. In the former, practical learning rotations in WHH include working shifts over the Christmas and New Year period, and holiday times over the course of the academic year are similar to many employment contexts (6 weeks annually). These study and work experience modes are considered to more accurately reflect real-life employment contexts in the hospitality industry than traditional academic term times. On the other hand, the three-year degree options (which do follow the traditional academic calendar) offer longer study break periods and a less intensive weekly lecture schedule. A key aim of increasing the offer of study modes has been to open the school's reach to a wider group of potential students, catering both to those who prefer a more traditional time table (for example because they need to work part time to support themselves, need more time for their academic work, or have other commitments) and, as a more fundamental change, to international students requiring Tier 4 visas. Nevertheless, the accelerated degree option remains highly attractive among students, not least due to the prospects of incurring lower study fee debt and entering the work force at an earlier point. From the perspectives of the academic staff and other stakeholders interviewed, the accelerated degree was considered a key point of innovation, although there was also agreement that having a more diverse offer was beneficial to the programme overall. A senior staff member at the Edge Foundation emphasises that:

[...] the accelerated course, the industry engagement, this [...] work preparedness is what the real strengths of the hotel school are. The graduates are coming out of there after two years with good degrees, increasingly good degrees, and going into graduate level positions and being promoted.
[Senior staff member, Edge Foundation].

Regardless of model and duration, the basic structure for all courses involves academic and work-based practical learning at the following levels (see also Appendix 1):

Level 4 is considered to emphasise an operative role, focusing on trade and craft skills development and a more introductory experience in hospitality, embedded in the specific context of customer experience at Wivenhoe House Hotel. Academically, this level relies on tutor-led activities, with high levels of class contact, and promotes the development of descriptive and self-reflective capacities of students.

At **Level 5** students move on to supervisory roles in the hotel, focusing on identification of issues and problems as well as specialised roles in hotel departments. They are expected to begin to appreciate

and apply industry best practice, with a wider regional or national focus beyond the hotel itself. Academically, the focus includes more elements of self-directed learning and analysis, while reflective capacities start to incorporate professional perspectives and values.

Level 6 reaches the stage of managerial roles, with independent and self-directed learning in the forefront. Students are expected to use critically-evaluative reflection skills to appreciate and propose solutions for strategic and detailed issues in industry, becoming confident and proactive influencers and ambassadors capable of incorporating international perspectives, with high levels of professionalism and objective self-evaluation. At the centre of this level is a consultancy project, during which students develop and present solutions to real-life industry problems in groups.

An important element in key stakeholders' understandings of the EHS concept is the distinction between further education and higher education levels of study. While the former focuses on craft-specific skills in different sectors and departments of hospitality, the EHS concept involves supporting students to develop strategic and managerial skills through the experience of carrying out key operative roles at the hotel. The focus is less on depth and detail, but rather on breadth and overview, building the experiential foundations required to develop well-rounded strategic perspectives:

"They are not following a traditional craft book or text book on how to fold a napkin or how to serve a table, but what they are finding out is more about the running and the management of a restaurant"
[Hotel management staff].

This experience allows students to appreciate hotel management in action and to critically engage with this experience. Such continuous engagement with the workplace provides a valuable training context which ultimately contributes to both academic quality and sector-related skills acquired in a real-life setting:

When I talk to other universities, and we talk about training and that sort of thing, they say – in higher education that has to be education, it can't be training because training is not higher education. That seems to get other universities in a real knot. Because, at its heart, a hospitality employer would probably prefer training over education, if we are going to segment it. But the way the Edge [school] and [the hotel] do it: you are getting a very rigorous academic degree, but you are getting this work experience which is mixed in, consistently. It's not just a six month secondment, as a sandwich degree, it carries on for the whole two years or three years [Industry representative].

The insights into a range of roles and hotel departments, as well as into the wider hospitality industry, enhance students' ability to develop a professional attitude, supporting them to be 'industry-ready' at graduation. As a result of the distinctive nature of the EHS programme, especially the two-year accelerated degree programme (with its shorter and more intensive term times and reduced holiday periods), academic staff interviewed consider that many students are likely to have made a more conscious choice to embark on their particular course – a quality which may be of particular advantage for their commitment to professionalism. A senior staff member of a collaborating hospitality company considers that:

[...] with the Edge [school] there are more opportunities for [students] to keep [...] remembering the sector they have been actually studying to become a manager in. [...] I think you [as an employer] get somebody who is a student, a graduate, who is very focused on the sector ... I don't know how many, after graduation do not go to the hospitality field, but I know ... but there will be a good number in other universities.... But by the time they finish their education at the Edge, they know the sector they would like to get into... they have become quite a specialist ... and I also think the Edge has managed to create quite a saleable brand, a quality brand [Industry representative].

A further key feature of the EHS concept is a high level of industry engagement built into the courses. This involves guest lectures by industry experts, the consultancy project, scholarships, events and conferences, a very prominent presence from the industry at the university career fair. The programme seeks to promote students' confidence and skills for networking with potential employers from the very beginning of their course, utilising the range of opportunities provided throughout their academic and practical experiences. Such networking events provide the students with a range of opportunities to develop their professional contacts and increase confidence and employability:

[We are] making sure that all students are invited, not just level 6 [...] so they can start thinking about the breadth of the hospitality industry [...] They can start building their own networks.[...] It gives them a level of confidence, for example when they go out for interviews they are already confident to talk to people, because they have done it [Academic staff member, EHS].

The support for learning in both academic and work-based contexts is appreciated by the students interviewed for this research as highly personalised. Students value the fact that academic staff know everyone by name and ask how they are when they meet on campus. The operation of a general 'open door' policy allows them to interact with their lecturers and student services staff within the school on an informal and ad hoc basis to discuss current issues and reflect on experiences. Both students and academic staff members referred to 'bonding' when describing the relationship between students and lecturers:

Interaction between the students and the lecturers is a lot better than I have seen in a lot of other courses. The classes are smaller so you can ask more questions, you can interact, you can question things you are not sure about whereas in other courses you do not have this bond with the lecturers. [...] It's much more personable than other courses, and you can tell that they [lecturers] love what they do [Student, Level 4, focus group 1].

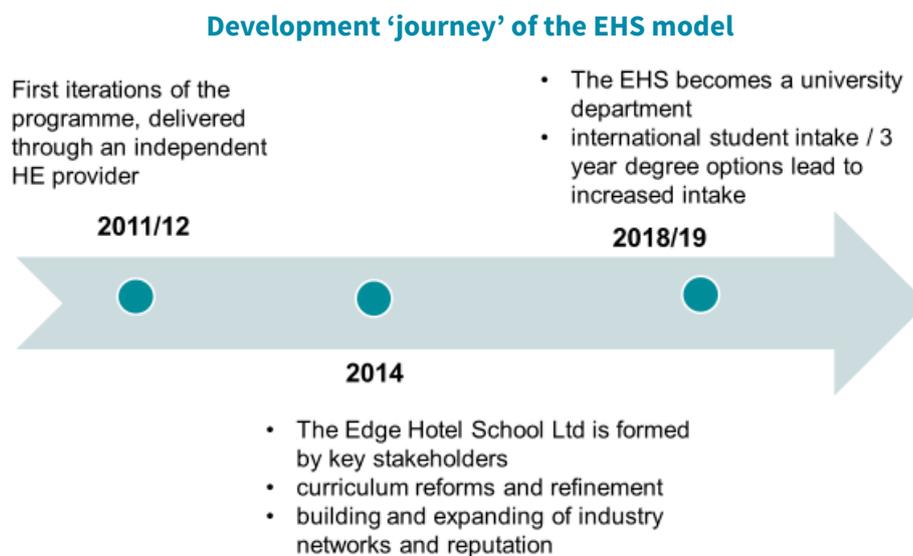
Because of the size of us [...] We know all our students' names, in most cases, we know what their personal circumstances are, because there are only 111 at the moment. We get quite close bond with students and [...] our offices are just around their study area. They quite often would give us anecdotal feedback as well as formal feedback. So we hear about issues almost before they happen, and as they happen certainly [Academic staff member, EHS].

Students are assigned personal tutors, but they appreciate that this does not confine them to only seeking the support of one particular assigned staff member; instead they feel able to approach any

member of the academic team. Academic staff are described as very knowledgeable, with a wealth of direct industry experience alongside academic expertise, conveying a sense of inspiration as well as trust that the support of such well-qualified and well-connected lecturers will be valuable for students' growing capacity to realise their own professional goals and ambitions. In the most recent National Student Survey (NSS, 2020) the EHS scored 100% for overall student satisfaction.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EHS CONCEPT SINCE ITS INCEPTION

As mentioned earlier in this report, the structure and management of the school have undergone a number of changes since its inception. The curricula for the different degree courses have also been subject to development and refinement, although the overall core ethos of the programme has remained the same. Overall, three distinct phases can be discerned in the 8-year timeline since the inception of the EHS:



2011- 2014: Development of the EHS concept and its partnerships

At the point of inception of the EHS concept, the Edge Foundation and the University of Essex partnered with a local further education provider, the Colchester Institute, for the purposes of programme development. However, this initial plan did not go ahead, and instead, the first iterations and student intake began in 2012, with the programme being delivered at the EHS and WHH sites through a private education provider (Kaplan Open Learning), with degree validation provided by the University of Essex. The model whereby the premises for the commercially run business providing the real-life context for work-based learning were owned and provided by the university, while the educational aspect was being outsourced to an independent provider, is described as unusual inversion of more common partnership models where existing commercial businesses team up with universities as education providers. The various levels of innovation inherent in this endeavour are summarised by one stakeholder as follows:

[First] It was an exciting and novel development in many respects: the only example of a hotel school in the UK; [...] We were trying to set up something which was new and different and in the UK - unique.

Second, a key point of departure was that it was a venture that was designed to give expression to the Edge Foundation mission of ‘learning through doing’ and has always had a very work-based focus, looking to balance learning that takes place in the workplace and learning that takes place in the classroom. And the third point of innovation is that the school was delivering accelerated degrees over a two year period [...] so graduates [...] transitioning in the world of work sooner [University of Essex academic leadership member].

During its initial years, the programme faced some trials around balancing the needs of the commercially run hotel with the demands of putting a new and challenging curriculum into practice, as well as creating working relationships in a novel partnership. In 2014, changing higher education funding contexts led to the withdrawal of the independent provider and the key stakeholders founded the Edge Hotel School Ltd. in order to continue delivering the programme.

2014 – 2018: Edge Hotel School Ltd

In the second phase, from 2014 to 2018, the EHS operated as a limited company formed and sustained by members of the key stakeholder organisations (the Edge Foundation, the University of Essex, leaders from both the EHS and the hotel, as well as wider industry representatives). This phase involved a change of leadership for both the hotel and the school, followed by a programme of wide-ranging reforms which clarified learning objectives within the curriculum. This was also a period in which the EHS established itself fully as an independent organisation, grew and sustained its industry networks and its reputation within the sector, as well as diversifying its course offer to include events management.

A key challenge for the programme since its inception has been to balance the needs of the commercially run hotel with the learning needs of students on work-based placement rotations:

The challenge has always been how you get the hotel and education to work together, because you basically have competing objectives – the hotel wants to be commercial, the hotel school wants to deliver an educational experience [...] and because you have got different structures, different personnel [Senior staff member, Edge Foundation].

In the view of academic staff, the initial curriculum and course structure versions were found to be too focused on the hotel’s requirements, with some negative impact on student satisfaction, referenced in the 2016 report of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2016). Rebalancing these aspects is seen as an important step to making the programme more successful:

I think we’ve got the focus right now, where we look at student experience first, and then try to manage it in such a way, that we deliver for [the hotel manager], whereas I think the previous structure was very much delivering for the hotel, and students fitting in with that. All of that changed. We also took the opportunity to update all of the modules [Academic staff member, EHS].

The reforms redrew this balance in favour of an emphasis on students’ learning experiences. This included a more integrated structure of placement rotations and academic classes, where the latter

function as ‘stepping stones’ to professional practice rather than being based on a block-teaching approach of theory and practice. The EHS curricula balance experience in the hotel with taught classes that integrate and consolidate learning from practical experience alongside industry engagement through guest lectures. The industry-focused consultancy project (see Section 3.4 of this report) at level 6 was also introduced at that time, along with changes to assessment structures and processes to make these less time-consuming and more compatible with a focus on higher, rather than further education requirements. While the EHS initially had three student intakes per year, this was reduced to two based on considerations of demand and efficiency.

A key factor for the success of this change programme was the involvement of students and hotel staff, providing opportunities for consultation and feedback and thus ensuring the ‘buy-in’ of these key stake holders. The QAA’s 2016 report emphasises the positive reception of changes by students and identifies the ‘*positive impact of the School’s timely and effective responses to the student voice as an area of good practice*’ (p.43). From the perspective of academic staff, the institutional flexibility of the EHS as an independent provider at the time was a strong facilitative factor in ensuring a speedy process of strategic review and reform.

2018/19 onwards: EHS as a department of the University of Essex

The third phase, from the academic year 2018/19 onwards, has been marked by the transition of the EHS into a department of the University of Essex, which had hitherto been a closely involved partner (through academic validation, membership of the EHS board and as the owner of the hotel through a subsidiary company). This change has also led to the establishment of three-year degree programmes and the ability of the EHS to recruit international students requiring a tier 4 UK Visa, which would have been beyond the reach of a small independent provider. This has allowed the EHS to significantly increase student recruitment, supporting the long-term financial viability of the programme. The expansion and diversification of the student population is seen as an opportunity not just to bring the EHS concept to a wider audience and ensure its long term financial viability, but also as an arena for diversity-related learning as an important part of the industry skills base. A more diverse student cohort including international students also better reflect the real-life contexts of a globalised hospitality industry.

The incorporation of the EHS as a university department has also provided it with access to the much larger marketing capacity and full range of the university’s central services (for facilities, rooms, staff development, human resources, student services, etc.). Additional benefits cited by academic staff include sharing best practices and networking with other university departments and access to wide range of staff training opportunities:

The advantages [...] one is international students, two ... there is a lot more support there. If you are a small team independent, if you lost one member of staff, and if you have two members of staff it would mean 50% loss, but the university could second. We also hear what other departments are up to, and share best practice [...] and network with the rest of the university, use their IT system, all the projects they are doing and all training they are offering now [Academic staff member, EHS].

Future development plans include launching an already validated Master's level programme at the EHS, along with developing the research capacity of academic staff, for example through doctoral research (which for some is already under way). However, the EHS already is engaged in a wide range of knowledge exchange activities involving industry partners, and it is hoped that this will provide an appropriate practice- and theory-based context for future research endeavours.

Both academic and hotel staff interviewed considered the preservation of the Edge Hotel School's innovative concept and model, specifically the industry-engaged focus, as a key endeavour required for the future development of the programme. The success of the programme was directly linked to input from other stakeholders, particularly the hospitality industry and its bodies, and the Edge Foundation as a champion for innovative industry-engaged and action-based learning¹.

WIVENHOE HOUSE HOTEL AS INTEGRATED PRACTICAL LEARNING SITE

The relationship between the Edge Hotel School and Wivenhoe House Hotel (WHH) is described by staff interviewed as highly interdependent and requiring careful balancing of needs, for commercial success based on a satisfactory customer experience on the one hand, and for a real-life action-based learning environment with room for mistakes (as key learning points), for reflection and for both developing and inspiring confidence and professionalism on the other.

Maintaining this balance is a key challenge for the EHS and for the hotel, leading to the need for a highly staffed rota at the hotel to mitigate against any negative impact on customer experience resulting from students' status as initially often inexperienced learners who are still developing professional attitudes and identities.

We are in a constant state of training; there's no hotel in the world that is constantly training [...] we're talking about turnover of four weeks ... and it's difficult [Hotel management staff].

For the hotel, maintaining consistent standards is more difficult when you have got a rapidly changing staff base working in the hotel [University of Essex academic leadership member].

Both academic and hotel staff highlighted the importance of open communication and coordination between the EHS and the hotel. The work-based learning context is subject to a Service Level Agreement between WHH and the EHS, constituting a genuine partnership rather than a purchaser-provider relationship. Senior managers of the hotel and the school meet regularly and are represented on each other's boards and committees. The 2016 QAA report for the EHS praised the "*collaborative relationship between the School and the Hotel, which produces a unique and stimulating learning environment for students [as] good practice*" (p.24, emphasis in original). The same report also describes the "*successful integration of Hotel staff and School staff into the learning enterprise [as] critical to the success of its*

1. NB: the terminology historically used by the Edge Foundation is 'learning by doing', but some members of the academic team consider that action-based learning (capturing the same meaning and ethos) is a preferable term in a higher education context. This report therefore reflects the terminology used by research participants.

degree provision” (p.35). The positive character of this partnership is also an achievement owed to the successful implementation of reforms mentioned above. Positive change was achieved through the implementation of training programmes for hotel staff, along with embedding academic staff at the hotel, regular meetings and clear communication strategies. Maintaining good relationships and communication is not taken for granted by either party, with some accounts of previous tensions and siloed attitudes early on in the development of the EHS concept:

There is a very good flow of conversation between the two organisations because of the relationship we now have [...] What was very clear, that the hotel needs to run by a hotelier and ‘academic’ needs to be run by an academic, and these two parts need to come together, and of course in these relationship there are an awful lot of stakeholders involved, it’s not just the Edge Foundation and Edge Hotel School, we have got university, we have the industry. We have got a very fluid relationship; [the principal] and I meet once a week, just in case there are any issues, we meet as an operation team every second week [Hotel management staff].

The work-based learning during rotations in different departments at Wivenhoe House Hotel provide just one context where this learning takes place. While the hotel setting allows students to apply learning from lectures in practice, classroom-based learning utilises students’ real-life experiences for discussions and reflections, whilst also drawing on ‘live’ key business data (such as hotel reviews or accounts information).

Maybe a good example, if I am teaching ‘profit/loss’ for instance, I will get hold of the week’s flash report and will have weekly finances for the week before, when I know [the students] have been in the hotel, and I can teach about KPI [Key Performance Indicators] and profit/loss, knowing full well that the students will be looking at these figures [...] and I can say to them, if you manage to increase upsell by 5 percent, what figure would change? And they would know that they could have upsold that night a bit more and the figure would actually change. The difference between teaching theoretical profit and loss and having theoretical case studies behind you on the screen is very, very different from teaching actual hotel finances, where students actually have an impact on it [Academic staff member, EHS].

Feedback from hotel staff on students’ competences has a bearing on their overall assessment (although it is not used as a basis for grading as would be the case in further education contexts). Professional performance assessments take the form of a ‘mock’ interview, with a strong focus on reflection and competence development, supporting employability skills. Students also commit to a professional code of conduct, incorporating standards of professional appearance and behaviour. This was highlighted as an important aspect of preparation for ‘real life’ working contexts in the hospitality industry:

I know they don’t always like that but it’s really, if you see them they look like they mean business. And everyone goes to lectures casually. They might only understand when they graduate but when you look uniformed – and we’re still a business that uses uniforms it’s quite powerful, they look like they’re on the same mission to become the best hospitality student you possibly can be. It’s very powerful when you visit [Industry representative].

Stakeholders involved in delivering the programme are aware that the intensity of practical work experience in a real life setting alongside academic work challenges students to work hard, but this is seen as enhancing their skills for managing in future work situations:

They are doing a full blown BA Hon Degree with all of the coursework that goes with that as well as doing their shifts in the hotel and delivering [academic] papers. [...] They are under a lot of pressure... they are under an awful lot of pressure, especially when they get to Level 6, [...] but at the same time over two years they have to have a real university experience [...]. I understand it to be the way forward [...] this has got to be a way forward for industry, [...] not only in hospitality but other service degrees - degrees that deliver a service [Hotel management staff].

An informal aspect of learning with capacity to be explored further within the context of the programme is the opportunity of students to take on paid shifts in the hotel on a casual work basis. The students who had taken up this opportunity valued the experience because it provided an even more ‘real life’ work context than the practical rotations as part of their course. On the one hand, this was because group sizes on departmental rotations were seen as sometimes hindering opportunities for all students to engage in similar tasks (an issue which the EHS is seeking to mitigate by providing more workshops and master classes as teaching tools). On the other hand, paid shifts were considered as opportunities to demonstrate independent working and take on responsibility. From the perspective of hotel and academic staff, the students who take on paid work shifts often were regarded as the more active and engaged members of their cohort, although it is not clear whether this was due to self-selective factors (more active students opting for more enhancement opportunities) or due to the positive impact which participating in paid work had on competence development.

FOCUS ON INDUSTRY-ENGAGED EDUCATION

As indicated above, industry-engaged education, along with professionalism, are key features of what makes the EHS programme distinct in the perspectives of all stakeholders interviewed for the research. The student handbook describes this as a focus on

...developing higher level practical and employability skills to prepare to enter or return to working life, developing independence, and experiencing a different cultural and social environment. Qualities developed, such as a wide variety of practical and leadership skills, organisational and communication skills, analytical and critical ability and independent judgement are highly valued by employers [University of Essex, 2019, p.14].

Conversations at the EHS alumni network event and a subsequent interview with a senior staff member of a partnering hospitality company provided important insights into external stakeholder perceptions of the programme. The EHS model is described as a quality ‘brand’ filling a gap in hospitality education, particularly at a time when other higher education institutions are cutting back on the practically-based elements of their courses. In this context, the EHS is seen as standing against retrogressive

trends in hospitality education and similar sectors which prioritise cost cutting and lead to the merger of specialised programmes into more generalist business management degrees.

There are quite a lot of comments coming from top people in our industry. The one is that we are 'oven ready' [...]. And somebody else says that the whole sector is going in a completely wrong direction, away from the work-based learning, except for one exception [...], Essex [EHS] [Academic staff member, EHS].

We are here on a continuum which is a working environment, not just realistic but working. And everything we do, applies 100 percent to the discipline, the subject, and the industry we work in [EHS leadership team member].

Graduates of the EHS are considered to demonstrate high levels of resilience alongside strong academic performance, supporting them to become 'rounded' professional personalities. The interplay of rigorous academic study and embedded real-life work experience throughout their course is considered as a key factor promoting this resilience.

When they leave this place and go to industry, the feedback we have is so wonderful! "My god, why can't all students be like this!" [...] Of course, it's workplace learning [Hotel management staff].

The students have a high level of resilience when they graduate, and the hospitality sector is quite challenging and there's definitely ups and downs, good days and bad days. What [EHS students] seem to have is a better ability of keeping 'a bad day' as one day, rather than saying 'My life is over as I know it because someone has complained about me' or 'I am working this shift I don't want to do and this means I am going to miss a social event'. Some students just can't just cope with this. And the Edge [Hotel School] students ... Resilience is the right word. Academically strong and very resilient. And I think this mainly comes from this magic the Edge Foundation brings, where they are learning both academically and vocationally [Industry representative].

The practical experience in the hotel is seen to instil a professional attitude in students, represented, for example, through their conduct and dress codes.

One of the things that our students learn through this sort of educational experience are a range of skills that you might describe as professionalism, which they might not have when they are starting [University of Essex academic leadership member].

In a sector prone to risks of fragmentation and insularity (as a downside of its entrepreneurship and vibrant diversity), the EHS concept supports the development of students' professional identity and their motivation to stay in the hospitality field after graduation, as well as maintaining ongoing networks as alumni. The latter point was also confirmed through conversations with alumni at the EHS network event.

A key example of embedded industry-engagement is the consultancy project undertaken at level 6, where a real-life problem provided by industry partners is tackled by students in groups. Employers collaborating with the EHS appreciate the skills students gain through this piece of work, applying academic knowledge to issues of key relevance to the industry:

The consultancy projects [in the EHS] are more grounded than in an average university, because right away [students] are able to apply it to a real life situation on a regular basis rather than doing a piece of research and then having to go ask an employer if can they hang around their business for a while ... for some work experience [Industry representative].

The consultancy project also enjoys particular popularity among students, being valued as a key chance to prove their skills and attract the attention of potential future employers. The project involves ongoing contact with the industry partners, culminating in a final presentation in front of them. Academic staff provided examples of the direct impact which some of these projects have had on businesses (such as influencing their branding decisions in light of students' research evidence), while several graduates have been offered employment in the companies linked to their consultancy projects. The example of the consultancy project also demonstrates the two-way relationship and feedback chain of industry engagement. On the one hand, the programme aims to instil 'industry-readiness' in its graduates, promoting the school's reputation among employers through the evidently high competence levels of alumni. On the other hand, industry partners are enticed to participate in aspects of education through guest lectures, hosting field trips, supporting conference and events, as well as individual scholarships. Conversations with industry representatives and alumni confirmed how highly these industry engagement activities were valued as distinctive elements of the EHS concept:

... industry can help maintain the horizon. When you are in academia you are very focused on achieving that result; the stronger the relationship with industry you actually see the reason why you're are having the exam, it's not the end but part of the journey [Industry representative].

Our interviews also indicated that industry engagement both requires and facilitates mutual learning and exchange. This is of crucial importance in a context where hospitality education has suffered poor reputation within the industry and where higher education (and its distinctiveness from further education) is not necessarily well understood. Industry engagement in education needs to go hand in hand with the engagement of (higher) education in industry concerns and developments. The hotel manager described this as a role for higher education to 'educate the industry'. Higher education skills and introducing 'a wider view of the world' are considered as key benefits for addressing the complex demands of the hospitality industry. While there are traditional tensions between 'working your way up' in an organisation and entering work in a management position through a degree, stakeholders interviewed for the research considered that the latter prevented an insular perspective and a more open attitude to challenge:

You could argue that both the college and the uni[versity] could create this vocational bit to a point, you know, 'hands-on learning', but I think [there is also] a global, a wider worldview, [...] Having had a theoretical education - I do not think it's always popular within hospitality [...] and I think a graduate

finds it tough when they are managing people who sort of say ‘you know, I worked my way up’ – there is always a tussle in the sector between working your way up and being parachuted from a degree into a management role... there is always a tension there... but this business [hospitality] is a very complex business, we have very high revenues there ...and then the worldview and the academic rigour of study - revision, testing, and then the theoretical input of someone challenging your views... because I think when you get into an organisation, very quickly you get the organisation’s view of the world, not a world view [...]. And to bring people in with a different background and different worldview is very important to us. And in the last two years we have recruited 30 graduates from different universities. I do not want to say the academic is not valuable because it is! [Industry representative].

Within processes of industry engagement, the role of EHS academic staff remains one of academic oversight and appropriate matching: guest lectures need to be relevant to students’ learning and enhance this, rather than posing mere opportunities for company PR or the sharing of personal ‘life stories’. The employment rate of EHS graduates exceeds 90 percent, reflecting the success of the programme.

Industry contacts and networks are proactively maintained by the EHS, building and sustaining long term relationships and networks. This is seen as a key distinctive factor of the programme:

...it’s about a clear and transparent commitment to the industry you are working with, it’s a bit like a wedding vow [...] We are devoted to these industries, we treasure our contact with those industries, they hopefully do the same with us, and it’s about a long term relationship which differentiates us from many other university degrees in hospitality where they will talk about it but they won’t do it [EHS leadership team member].

Examples of industry engagement at organisational levels include an accreditation of the EHS by the Institute of Hospitality and membership of the Council for Hospitality Management Education and the European Hotel Schools Federation. The nomination of the EHS for several hospitality related awards is named as evidence for this in the 2018 Monitoring Visit report of the QAA. Over the time of the programme, both the quantity and quality of network relationships is considered to have increased. From the Principal’s perspective, a direct correlation exists between industry award nominations and the programme’s overall achievements in the area of industry engagement and the innovative and distinctive approach underpinning the programme, supported by the Edge Foundation’s involvement. The same successes are considered to have been much harder to achieve if the EHS had been embedded within a traditional university context from the outset, even though the ongoing viability and sustainability of the programme has now made the incorporation as a university department the right choice going forward.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Students interviewed for this research appreciated the highly personalised levels of support for learning in both academic and work-based contexts. They value the fact that academic and support services staff at the school know everyone by name, are approachable and accessible, with a general ‘open door’ policy allowing opportunities for students to discuss current issues and reflect on their experiences.

Academic staff are described as very knowledgeable, with a wealth of direct industry experience alongside academic expertise. Students feel inspired by this and value the benefits of industry networks as opportunities for realising their own professional goals and ambitions. Student satisfaction is reflected in the recent NSS results (see 3.1). In our focus groups with students at different levels of study, the expertise, life experience and interactive teaching style of academic staff were particularly highlighted:

I think one of the best things is that the style of teaching is so varied, but they have so much experience in what they are talking about, you just engage in absolutely everything [Student, Level 4, focus group 1].

It does not feel like you are in the classroom with the teacher, it feels you are with someone who gives you life experiences [Student, Level 4, focus group 1].

You can see where you are going to go, whilst with other courses, it's very generic. But this a direct route into the industry [Student, Level 4, focus group 1].

Commenting on the practical learning opportunities offered by the programme, students interviewed appreciated above all the direct contact with customers as well as exposure to their feedback (both positive and negative). The experience of the full range of hotel departments was considered to offer valuable insights, as well as promoting their future credibility as managers in the hospitality industry:

...if you go in [as a manager] and you ask [the staff] to do a job like cleaning something absolutely disgusting, and they'll be like, 'I don't want to do that', but [because of the hands-on experience during the programme] you can say, 'I've done that, I've been in that situation', you're not just going in and ordering people around to do jobs that you haven't actually experienced yourself [Student, Level 5, focus group 2].

In addition, continuous theory–practice consolidation is considered an important aspect of practically based learning. Students recognise and appreciate opportunities to relate their theoretical knowledge (gained in the classroom) to the real life context of the hotel in a meaningful way. This supports their capacity for making connections between theory and practice. A key area for theory–practice integration are assignments:

We use our experience in a hotel for our assignments, one of them was to look into wedding [organising] and come up with a contingency plan And this [wedding] is actually going to happen in the hotel. So we can apply things that we have done in lecture to this wedding and say 'Oh yeah, we could have done this better, this should have happened, this should not have happened'. It does automatically cross over, because you are drawing on your experiences from the hotel to fill out your assignment [Student, focus group 1, Level 4].

While providing a real-life context, the hotel also functions as a somewhat protected learning space, allowing room for improving practice and learning through mistakes. This is in some contrast to work experience placements in industry which students perceive as networking opportunities, requiring

them to perform at higher skill levels to make a positive impression. On the other hand, students in Level 5 also rejected a labelling of the hotel as a ‘training school’ by customers, considering that this diminished the real-life context of their practical experience in the hotel.

The issue I found there is almost a stigma about training schools... the hotel being a training hotel - all of our guests came to see it this way, when they find out that we are Edge Hotel School and we are actually students. It's good in terms of being able to deal with customer complaints [...] or difficult situations, but as soon as it's explained to guests - oh they are just students. [...] it does lose a sense of reality [Student, Level 5, focus group 2].

In fact, the hotel concept is based on the learning aspects being as undetectable as possible to customers. Further reflecting on their practical skills acquired through this programme, Level 5 students specifically highlighted day-to-day experience in customer service, which offered opportunities to handle a range of real-life problems, and this, from the perspective of the students, makes the process of ‘school to work transition’ more natural and seamless:

[we value] the customer experience, hands on ...it's not even the management, it's how to deal with people, and the problems that we get here [...] because a lot of people when they may get into work, they get an awful lot of complaints, and they do not know how to handle them, but because we actually had this experience of learning in the hotel's different departments, we know straight away how to handle [the] situation [Student, Level 5, focus group 2]

Students’ opinions diverged on whether the two-year or the three-year course model offered more advantages: on the one hand, mature students and those who had started the course straight after leaving school appreciated the ‘fast-track’ nature of the two-year degree, along with the cost savings from fees. On the other hand, students were also aware of the challenges involved in having full schedules and balancing full day hotel rotation shifts with academic coursework deadlines.

When you think about it in other degrees you would not tell someone to get a full time job [...] and as soon as you realise it's a full time job it's really hard. We are uni students, most people when they are young they would like to have this uni life, everyone else is having, but we don't. Obviously, the benefit is two years, but downside it that we have such short deadline period [Student, Level 6, focus group 2].

At the same time, some students also expressed concerns that recent changes to the EHS organisational structure, its course delivery modes and increased student intake might pose some challenges to the small but successful real-life learning context offered within the hotel. These issues are discussed further below.

KEY POINTS OF SUCCESSFUL INNOVATION REPRESENTED BY THE EHS CONCEPT

The vision and mission of the EHS, since its inception, has been to champion an innovative approach in practically-based higher education. The integrated model of action-based learning offers a distinct

form of continuous, hands-on exposure to real-life workplace practices in a fully commercial 4-star hotel and this contributes to the development of a unique working and learning environment:

In terms of opportunities, for the hotel, it's offering guests unique guest experience. And guests should not be able to tell the difference between full-time staff and students but ...sometimes they can.. but actually that's the part of the experience they are choosing to have. In terms of the operation of the hotel ... you could describe the business model of the hotel as one in which employees (not quite employees) are paying their employer to work for them rather than being paid by the employer. [...] For the hotel school, I think, being able to have a quality workplace learning setting, really embedded in, is a unique advantage [University of Essex academic leadership member].

The model supports educational processes of *boundary crossing* (Akkerman and Bakker 2011) which allow students to apply skills, reflect on practice and integrate academic and work-based learning on an ongoing basis, rather than through longer but separate 'blocks' of theory and practice (such as in a more classical 'sandwich' degree).

The idea is that the hotel and the school teach hand in hand together and the students take learning from the classroom and would be able to put it into practice in the hotel, but they will also be able to turn things as they are happening in the hotel and bring them back to the classroom [Academic staff member, EHS].

Continuous crossing boundaries between theory and practice provides a range of opportunities for the student to apply their theoretical learning to practical activities in the hotel/industry and vice versa. Not only is the hotel geographically close to the EHS (adjacent buildings), but students are also enabled to immerse themselves in the working culture and values of a distinctive organisation which takes pride in creating real life and high-quality customer experiences. This involves learning by doing, including both learning from mistakes and best practices:

If something goes wrong in the hotel it's a real positive for us. Because we can teach them, [by] looking at how that team goes into malfunction -and what theory could have been used to make [the team] function better. So they [...] report on that basis – this is the theory behind this topic, this is what I actually saw in the hotel and this is how the hotel could perform better, if it employs [...] best practice [Academic staff member, EHS].

This embedded learning supports a sense of professionalism among students which puts them in an advantageous position upon graduation.

The EHS model is built on an ethos of industry engagement which runs through the whole of the programme and is cultivated through various activities such as guest lectures, conferences and events, career fairs and scholarships as well as involvement in teaching and learning activities:

[...] industry tends to kind of flock around this place. We get a lot of interest, and people want to work with us. So we took advantage of that and made up a unit where a hotelier would come with an issue,

opportunity or project of their own devising, and with our guidance, this would be given to a group of students and they would work on that project for a six month period, carry out research and then come back with recommendations, present those back as a report on the issue or opportunity, and present those to a hotelier. [Though this period] I take them physically to the client to meet them in their workplace – hotel - to see what the issue is, and the client would stay in contact with them throughout the process, and give them more information if they need it [Academic staff member, EHS].

The long-term commitment to industry relationships is also reflected in the academic and professional identities of teaching staff, all of whom have experience in and ongoing links with the industry. The relationships with industry also serve to instil a sense of purpose to the hard work involved in academic study, allowing students access to multiple networks and opportunities and helping them to envisage future career paths. Close working relationships with the industry have been demonstrated through collaborative projects and initiatives, which provide students with a range of opportunities to apply their skills to real-life commercial projects:

A company [Hotel and restaurant group] managing director asked us to look at their overall brand. [...] And the students came back ... They did not like the brand [...] and basically said you made a mistake with rebranding [...] and they managed to prove that the customers did not understand the word 'venue' [used in the new brand name]. The hoteliers understand the word venue, and assume that everybody else understands it, but customers don't. [The students] came back with the idea to change the company name. [...] He [the managing director] loved it and [...] now changed the whole company name [Academic staff member, EHS].

The accelerated two-year degree model has been a pioneering and distinct feature at the core of the EHS offer, involving savings in terms of duration and fees for students while offering the same volume of theoretical and practical learning experience. While this model requires students to work more intensively, it is also seen as leading to higher levels of focus, motivation and a more mature and responsible approach to learning.

For the university, the EHS provides the added value of a distinct and innovative programme in hospitality education (which did not previously exist as an academic department), delivering a 'ready-made' response (with a proven track record) to key current demands for innovation in the higher education landscape, both through its accelerated degree model and through its ethos of industry engagement and action-based learning. Similarly, a further benefit for evidencing innovation lies in the established partnership between the EHS and the Edge Foundation as an independent educational charity. The latter is seen as a champion for flexible and industry-engaged higher education through action-based learning approaches. In these ways, the EHS can function as a 'test lab' for new approaches for the wider university and it is described as continuing to occupy a distinctive position, regarded as 'different' by other departments, with the exception of individual, similarly distinct and innovative programmes (such as the East 15 Acting School based in the same faculty). For academic staff interviewed, this distinctiveness is closely linked to their own professional role and identity, characterised by a closer affinity to the industry rather than to a generic 'academic' role. This rejection of the role of a 'pure

academic' in favour of uniting theoretical and practical elements is a position which research by Dashper and Fletcher (2019) identified as one of the dominant narrative strategies in the events and hospitality higher education field, linked among other factors to its status as a relatively new discipline with strong professional roots. However, similar positions are also common for other fields with a strong practically-based and applied focus, particularly in service based professions.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS

The programme is overwhelmingly described as a success by stakeholders interviewed. However, any process of innovation involves challenges. Research participants highlighted different challenges, but for many of these there were existing ideas for how these could be mitigated. Often, challenges were also linked with potentials for future development of the programme.

At the outset, establishing an innovative programme involving such a wide range of factors and a number of diverse stakeholders has been described as a challenge in itself. Over the relatively short time of its existence, the EHS concept has already undergone significant reform and refinement and faced organisational change, while managing to strengthen the partnerships that lie at the heart of its successful delivery. Managing this complexity requires ongoing balancing acts to meet the requirements of a fully commercial hotel (without compromise to customer experience), while providing a successful and enriching learning environment for students (who in today's higher education landscape are also highly paying customers). For hotel staff, this means dealing with frequently changing student groups (as they rotate through different departments), with diverse expectations and skill levels. For the EHS on the other hand, a key challenge can be achieving a level of parity among students' learning experience. This is now mitigated through masterclass workshops on key industry skills.

The programme's own success in attracting higher student numbers and increasing its long-term financial viability has also brought the challenge of needing to accommodate real-life practical learning opportunities for more students in the hotel. Some research participants raised concerns that scaling up the programme might dilute some of its key practical learning benefits. However, there were also ideas for further innovation to address this challenge, some of which have already been put into practice: for example, events management students are able to replace one of their practical rotations in the hotel with an external placement focused on events. Other suggestions mentioned by research participants include: using a 'franchise' model for expansion (involving other hotels); or focusing on key IT systems and software used in hospitality contexts as part of practical learning. However, it was also highlighted that any increase in external learning opportunities needs to be balanced with maintaining the prominence of the immediate and embedded learning within Wivenhoe House Hotel.

Linked to this, a further key challenge identified by stakeholders is maintaining the distinct character of the programme, particularly now that the EHS has become a university department. While stakeholders interviewed pointed out a range of advantages associated with this incorporation, accepting the much more bureaucratic, slow-moving and risk-averse environment of the university in return was seen as unavoidable by academic staff. The dynamics of a large university, with long established processes

and procedures, can be at odds with the small-scale and therefore flexible, industry-engaged and entrepreneurial model of the EHS. In this context, research participants highlighted both challenges and opportunities: on the one hand, concerns about the EHS being subsumed into the existing structures of the university and losing its distinctiveness in the process; and on the other hand, the possibility of mutual learning, for example through the pioneering role of the EHS in relation to industry engagement. The change in organisational structure and governance has come at a time when the EHS is able to reap the rewards of previous reforms to the programme and curricula, carried out in a timely manner during the time when the school enjoyed maximum levels of independence and flexibility. Preserving the ethos of industry engagement and its strong practical learning contexts were seen as key elements, not least because hospitality-based programmes at other UK universities have seen the closure of dedicated practical learning contexts. Programme stakeholders considered the Edge Foundation to hold a key role in overseeing the further strategic development of the programme and safeguarding its unique concept and approach.

Further development opportunities envisaged also include a possible expansion into postgraduate learning and research. In this context, stakeholders emphasise the importance of retaining the successful strategy of industry engagement and real-life relevance. The existing wide range of knowledge exchange activities between the EHS and industry partners is hoped to provide a fruitful practice- and theory-based context for future research endeavours.

Overall, the challenges identified point to a need for ongoing negotiation and joint thinking involving all stakeholder groups in the future direction of the programme, and the responses of research participants indicate that this has prompted new ideas and solutions. In this context it seems that the Edge Hotel School's ethos of flexibility and innovation has been a facilitative factor for addressing the challenges encountered.

Over the last phase of research, it has become clear that the unprecedented character of public lockdown measures in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic will lead to uncertainty for the hospitality industry (as well as the higher education sector) for the foreseeable future. This poses a variety of further challenges for the EHS, its staff and students, alongside the hotel and its staff, which could not have been anticipated. The school has responded to the situation by implementing alternative teaching methods online and modifying the curriculum in the short term. In addition, the EHS has also developed a concept to continue with its industry-engaged ethos by seeking to balance digital engagement with direct, face to face engagement when it is safe to do so.



Conclusions and wider implications for the development of practically-based and industry-engaged higher education models

The Edge School Hotel's higher education provision offers a unique example of practically-based higher education. From the perspective of stakeholders interviewed for the research, the programme is considered as trailblazing and marking the way forward not just within the hospitality industry but for other service-based professions and disciplines. Based on its 8-year journey so far, the EHS model offers several key learning points, most importantly the evidence that such complex and ambitious endeavours are achievable.

The programme showcases the success of a 'learning by doing' or action-based learning approach, informed by industry-engagement. This provides students with clear perspectives, motivation as well as highly relevant knowledge and skills for the transition from academic study to work. At a time when students are paying customers of higher education, incurring substantial debt as part of their academic journey, facilitating this transition into employment becomes a key responsibility of higher education institutions. Thus, a model such as the EHS exemplifies the key aspects of what the Edge Foundation has set out as part of their vision for higher education in the UK (Edge Foundation, 2017).

The highly integrated nature of the EHS model provides extensive opportunities for students to synthesise and consolidate academic and practical learning by applying their knowledge and skills to

a real-life context. The programme supports students in developing not only an academic, but also a professional identity even before they graduate. The professional excellence and commitment of the teaching staff is one of the strongest assets of the programme. Ensuring that learners benefit from high quality courses that aim to equip them with the skills and knowledge required by contemporary and emerging economies is one of the most significant objectives of the EHS. . This is particularly important in a sector which is as highly dependent on professionalism as hospitality, where the needs and requirements of learning contexts have to be reconciled with delivering customer focused products. Similar issues exist for other service-based sectors and fields, such as social care or design.

The practical learning experiences in the EHS model provide opportunities for students to appreciate the highly diversified and specialised range of professional roles in the sector vis-à-vis core (and transferable) skills at higher education and managerial levels. Balancing these elements, which often straddle the nexus between operational and managerial levels (or further and higher education) can be particularly challenging for vocationally-oriented disciplines. By giving insight into both skill arenas and providing opportunities for students to appreciate their crossovers, interdependencies and intersections, the EHS supports graduates in developing more rounded perspectives, something which in conventional degrees usually only happens after graduates enter the world of work. Similar boundary crossing experiences would be highly relevant to programmes in other disciplines and professions.

The programme's journey also highlights the importance of careful balancing, managing and involvement of key stakeholders as part of processes of innovation. The EHS prides itself in highly developed and very successful employer engagement strategies to ensure that the programme, its teaching, learning and practical experience, articulate clearly with the needs of the industry. This programme is an excellent example of how a higher education programme and industry can work together to promote high quality education and training, contributing to graduates' employability, personal and career progression. The complexities involved in setting up, refining and sustaining a new and dynamic concept and the role of relationships of organisations and people within them are not to be underestimated. The EHS model provides valuable insights into how such partnerships can be kept synergetic and effective.

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Appendix 1: EHS Student Journey and Outcomes by Level

Developing the hospitality and event professionals of the future

THEME	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5	LEVEL 6
Role in Hotel	Operative; general duties; individual focus	Supervisory / team leader; monitor / deal resources (more specific duties); departmental focus.	Managerial duties and skills; organisational focus.
Level of time in hotel	Medium amount of time.	Medium amount of time.	Medium amount of time.
Reflective capacity	Descriptive; lower levels of understanding of professional and personal values; ability to describe and undertake and self-evaluation.	Some analysis; developing sets of professional and personal values; reasoned self-evaluation and some contextualisation of perspectives.	Critically evaluative; well-developed sets of individual professional and personal values; high level of objective self evaluation.
Industry focus	WH focus; local; individual customer focus.	Application of some industry best practice to the WH; regional and national understanding. Market segment focus.	External / industry focus; identification of specialisms within the industry; international / global; full market focus.
Learning style / motivation	Tutor led; supported; maximum class contact; teaching.	Tutor / self-directed ; moderate class contact; directed learning.	Higher levels of student-led, self-directed learning; independent; management of projects; least class contact
Blooms Taxonomy	Recall; identify; observe, summarise, understand, discuss, list; knowledge acquisition.	Explain, apply; solve; analyse, examine, devise, compare, contrast.	Evaluate, solve, rate, recommend, invent, predict, innovate, critique, synthesise; develop and critique theory.
Skills / characteristics	Amateur / low skill base; problem identifier; trade and craft skills; learning; responsive to issues and problems.	Theoretical solution proposer; application of best practice solutions; organisation level skills; identifying issues and problems.	High levels of emotional intelligence; professional; aspirational; business level skills; influencer, articulate; confident; flexible and adaptable; ambassadors; proactive to issues and problems.
Knowledge	Generalist understanding of the industry; tactical; short term approach.	More comprehensive understanding of industry; medium-term approach.	Specific detailed understanding of the industry; strategic approach.

Appendix 2: Topic guides used in field research

Interviews with staff at the EHS and WHH

Interviewee role [type of role, length of involvement, changes in your role over time, involvement in teaching / curriculum development, overlap between aspects of role]

Can you tell us about your role at the Edge Hotel School / Wivenhoe House Hotel [what is your job title; how long have you worked here; changes in your role over time]

What [if any] is your role in relation to teaching [mentoring / instructing] students? For WHH staff: how do different aspects of your role interact / overlap [work in the hotel vs teaching / mentoring / instructing students on placement]

Does your role involve contributing to curriculum development? [if yes: details of involvement / role] [if no: what is your understanding of the curriculum / how does it impact on your work?]

EHS concept

What is your understanding of the concept of the EHS?

How has this changed over time from your perspective?

What do you think sets this concept apart from other approaches to hospitality education you are aware of?

Key stakeholders

From your perspective, can you tell us about the roles of the hotel, the EHS and the university in this programme? How do different stakeholders interact? Who focuses on what?

In your perspective, have these roles / the interactions changed over time?

The programme [focus for academic/EHS staff, where relevant also for WHH staff]

1. Types of courses offered
2. Students – characteristics, challenges, known destinations after course
3. Curricula
 - What is the process for curriculum development / who decides on content?
 - Which key players are involved in designing the curriculum and its modules for each programme [WHH, EHS, UoE, wider industry, accrediting bodies, future employers]?
 - How do these key players work together [examples?]

4. Teaching approaches: role/balance of theory and practice; methods used (e.g. practical observation, workshops, group vs individual learning, role of employers/industry in both teaching); 'a typical day'
 - Can you tell us more about how the model of the EHS programme works out in practice [e.g. a typical day/week?]
 - Can you tell us more about key methods used in teaching? How would you describe the interplay between theory and practice?
 - How is integration of theory and practice facilitated? Who is involved in this? What (in your view) are the most successful approaches for this?
 - What (if any) are the roles of self-directed and peer-to-peer learning?
5. Assessment: procedures; standardised / tailored
 - Could you describe assessment procedures? Is assessment standardized or tailored to specific requirements?
6. Wider programme impact: industry, employer engagement, wider landscape of Higher Education
 - How does the programme fit into the industry requirements / developments
 - How does it fit into the wider landscape of Higher Education?
 - Can you tell us more about employer engagement related to the programme (within the course / beyond the course?)
7. Key achievements and challenges (and how are you trying to overcome them) [examples]
 - What has worked well? Any areas for change?
8. Any other comments?

Topic guide for interviews with learners [group / individual]

1. Which programme are you studying on and how long have you been studying?
2. Can you tell us about what made you decide to study on this programme?
 - [if comfortable answering] What did you do before studying on this programme?
 - Information accessed before starting / where did you get the information / what form / media / personal accounts?
 - Did you attend an open day prior to enrolling? [what was your experience / what were your impressions?]
3. What are your aims / plans for the future?
4. At the point when you started the course, what were your expectations about it?
 - [if applicable] have your views and expectations changed since starting the programme?

5. Can you describe what a typical day of learning looks like?
6. How many hours a week do you usually spend working at the hotel / in lectures / studying at home / other activities related to the course?
7. Is there a designated person for you on the course and what is their role (mentor, personal tutor, designated practice teacher, coach, etc.)? [possibly more than one?]
8. When you think about the practical learning on the course,
 - What does the practical learning at the hotel involve? [who do you work with, what activities do you do: e.g. observing, shadowing, carrying out hospitality tasks, contact with customers]
 - Who do you get feedback from on your practical learning and how (e.g. teaching staff/ professional staff/customers)?
 - Who (in terms of teaching / professional staff) do you spend most time with during the course [e.g. different roles]? [does it vary?]
 - What do you think are the most relevant things you are learning from the practical part of the course?
 - Is there anything that you think is not relevant / less relevant?
 - What, if anything, would you change about the practical learning elements?
9. When you think about the theory learning on the course,
 - What modules do you take?
 - How does the teaching happen (e.g. lecture/presentations, group discussions, workshops, reading, student presentations in class...)?
 - Do you have a personal tutor or similar?
 - What do you think are the most relevant things you are learning from the theoretical part of the course?
 - Is there anything that you think is not relevant / less relevant?
 - What, if anything, would you change about the theoretical learning elements of the course?
10. Does the course help you make links between theory and practice?
 - How does this happen - could you give us some examples?
11. Have you had any contact with potential employers as part of your course? (if yes, can you tell us more about this)?
12. What (if anything) in your view is special / unique about this programme? (this could be positive or negative)

13. What is your understanding of the roles of different people and organisations involved in this course? How do you think they work together?

– Is there anything (from your perspective) that could be improved about how different people / organisations work together to deliver this course?

14. Thinking about your overall experience on this course (so far), how would you describe this?

– What were the highlights?

– Is there anything that you would change?





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