

# Reconsidering the nature of the learning space in practically-based higher education: Innovative approaches to higher education in the UK context

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## ABSTRACT

The significance of equipping higher education graduates with both practical skills and theoretical knowledge relevant to their future workplace has been identified as one of the priorities in the higher education sector. Specifically, the issues, such as the preparation of young people for the world of work, facilitating the links between academic studies and practical experiences, and situating practice-based education have become central to the higher education landscape. This article discusses the extent to which practically-based higher education learning spaces can be constructed and co-constructed, involving the cooperation and collaboration of different stakeholders: employers, university lecturers and students. The article will particularly draw on the perspectives from a case study of practically-based higher education in the hospitality sector in England. Drawing on this case study the article will address the following research questions: (1) How can practically-based learning spaces be constructed and co-constructed within the context of higher education? and (2) What is the role of different stakeholders in this process? The article argues that the development of a practically-based higher education learning space is much more complex than simply bringing together academic and practical learning, and involves both institutional affordances, industry engagement and collaboration of key stakeholders.

## KEYWORDS

learning at workplace, employer engagement, practically-based higher education

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## INTRODUCTION

The significance of equipping higher education graduates with both practical skills and theoretical knowledge, relevant to their future workplace has been identified as one of the priorities in the higher education sector. Specifically, the issues, such as the preparation of young people for the world of work, facilitating the links between academic studies and practical experiences, and fostering practice-based education have become central to the higher education landscape (Bridgstock & Tippett, 2019; Mason, 2020). Developing work-ready graduates has become increasingly important as universities are often measured by it. For employers this means employing a newly qualified graduate that adds value to the business from the very start of their employment. However, the imbalance between academic studies and practical experiences built into university provision resulted in graduates often not being prepared for the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012). This article discusses the ways practically-based higher education learning spaces can be constructed and co-constructed, involving the cooperation of different stakeholders: employers, university lectures and students. The rationale for this article is strongly underpinned by both a national and international agenda on higher education linking to employability. A range of academic publications (e.g. Lund et al., 2021; Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020; Passaretta & Triventi, 2015) and policy papers highlighted the significance of work-related experiences within higher education. In the national context, graduate employability and industry-related skills have been recognised as major contributors to the economic prosperity of the UK (Department for Education, 2021). One useful definition for employability in this study clearly links knowing, doing and demonstrating skills and attitudes:

Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, xi)

The article aims to provide insight into the dimensions of cooperation between HE and industry, particularly drawing on the perspectives from a case study of practically-based higher education undergraduate programme in the hospitality sector in England (UK). Drawing on this case study the article will address the following research questions: (1) How can practically-based learning spaces be constructed and co-constructed within the context of higher education? and (2) What is the role of different stakeholders in this process? The article argues that the development of a practically-based higher education learning space is much more complex than simply bringing together 'academic' and 'practical' learning. It will argue that the practically-based learning space is constructed and co-constructed through both institutional affordances, individual agency as well as networking and collaboration of the key stakeholders. The discussion will focus on the complexities of practically based HE teaching and learning spaces, particularly highlighting the multidimensional interplay between learning and working spaces.

Despite the extensive discussion of the significance of equipping higher education graduates with practical skills relevant to their occupational areas, there are still issues that would benefit from further development. The cross-over between academic studies and practical experiences



goes beyond simply equipping graduates with practical capabilities required by employers, but involves fostering a deep understanding of their skills and expertise such that they are able to meet unknown challenges in the context of constantly changing world of work. This requires deep understanding of theory, that is integrated with practical skills and involves the cooperation of different stakeholders: employers, university lectures and students. The article takes as its starting point that more needs to be known about the contribution that practically-based higher education makes to the development of the forms of expertise that facilitate student employability and sector-specific skills in response to employers' constantly changing requirements. Taking into account a range of pertinent issues previously discussed in both national and international research publications, this article, aims to shed light on the practical implications and approaches for enhancing an integrated model of industry engaged teaching and learning in HE.

Recognising both the complexity and depth of the concept of practically-based HE, this article does not aim to provide a comprehensive conceptual consideration of this notion: such extensive discussion would be outside the scope of this article. This article rather endeavours to consider approaches and strategies adopted by our case - the Hospitality School - for enhancing industry-engaged HE in the context of the hospitality sector. Our case study demonstrate that this is achieved by constructing affordances for boundary crossing between the spaces of higher education and work. The data have contributed to a better understanding of crossing boundaries between working and learning spaces, in the context of our case study model of integrated practically-based higher education.

### **Practically-based learning and spaces in the context of higher education**

The importance of the integration of education and the world of work has been recognised as a key issue for policy, practice and research in both further and higher education. As observed by [Fettes, Evans, and Kashefpakdel \(2020\)](#) in preparing young adults for work, there has been a long history of identifying skills, qualities, attitudes and behaviours required to be successful in the workplace. Fostering graduate work-related skills and facilitating the links between theory and practice have been increasingly highlighted as crucial components of the successful transition from education to work ([Tran & Soejatminah, 2017](#)). Specifically, it has been noted that due to the lack of practical experience, HE graduates are finding it difficult to obtain graduate-level work and this makes it extremely challenging to break into the sectors they were aiming at ([Helyer & Lee, 2014](#)).

The concern about the widespread skill mismatch and skill shortage affecting the UK labour market ([Bridgstock & Tippett, 2019](#); [Consearo, 2021](#); [Cranmer, 2006](#); [Moore & Morton, 2017](#)) has stimulated the debate about the role and purpose of higher education. The continuous changes in both the requirements of the knowledge economy and the HE sector have been recognised as an important trend influencing approaches in HE teaching and learning ([Department for Education, 2021](#)). Embedding employability skills into the UK higher education sector has been considered as one of the key issues to address the gap between what HE students learn and what they are actually expected to know and demonstrate in order to be job-ready ([Sonal, Dean, and Reynolds \(2017\)](#) particularly brings attention to these two important aspects: (1) employability as 'job getting' – the ability of the graduate to secure a job after graduation and (2) the development of attributes, qualities and skills considered essential to



employers and that help graduates secure a graduate job (Sonal et al., 2017). Addressing these significant issues, has increasingly involved higher education institutions efforts to reconsider the methods they use to enhance student employability and to introduce various measures with an increasing focus on providing work experience (Helyer & Lee, 2014).

The challenges of fostering the links between higher education and industry has been often attributed to the difficulties of integrating both theory and practice into the same course in the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the student and that would enable them to more closely associate the practical value of learning theoretical concepts (Wren & Wren, 2009). Creating opportunities for connecting theory and practice and crossing boundaries between academic and practical knowledge in the context of higher education have been recognised as the crucial element of enhancing graduate employability and job-ready skills (Heesom, Olomolaiye, Felton, Franklin, & Oraifige, 2008; Lund et al., 2021; Meager, 2008).

Some commonly cited challenges relate to the perception of the notion of higher education, where the learning space has been traditionally associated with the acquisition of subject-specific academic (theoretical) knowledge. Bringing together and integrating academic and work-related spaces in the context of higher education requires some reconceptualization of the traditional academic learning space. It has been observed that the multidimensional nature of the learning space contributes to the ways it is constructed through social processes and practices, and constructed by them (Brooks et al., 2012). This provides opportunities for crossing boundaries between different spaces, for example, learning and working spaces. In the context of higher education, learning through supplementing disciplinary knowledge with practice (and vice versa) requires navigating and crossing boundaries between academic and work-related spaces. Crossing boundaries between the context of academic and industry-related spaces is a multifaceted process which is co-constructed by joint efforts of relevant stakeholders. Our findings indicate that there are some key features associated with this process, such as integrating of innovative teaching and learning strategies to enhance links between theory and practice, promoting industry engaged outlook as well as networking and cooperation with employers and other stakeholders. The influence of the learning spaces, interactions and communication (e.g. dynamics of interactions and communications) further underpin the ways practically-based learning spaces are constructed through social processes and constructed by them. The notion of the learning space at work conceptualised elsewhere (Kersh, 2015) brings attention to the multidimensional characteristics of the learning context which can be perceived as a combination or overlap of a range of components, including physical space, formal/informal learning, and virtual learning. Another related concept, of “boundaries”, has been highlighted as a type of “space” providing opportunities for individual engagement and potential for learning (Harris & Ramos, 2012). Boundaries and spaces are multifaceted and multidimensional, facilitating the ways in which learners acquire and use their knowledge and skills across different contexts and settings (Kersh, 2015).

Our case study, undertaken in the context of an undergraduate university programme will illustrate the ways, the process of crossing boundaries between higher education and industry in the hospitality sector, provide affordances for co-constructing practically-based learning spaces in higher education.



## CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Our case study, the Hospitality School<sup>1</sup> provides a unique model of integrated practically-based higher education, enabling university 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 (House Hotel). The Hospitality School was originally founded by an independent national foundation in partnership with one of the public research universities in England, and subsequently, the School has become a department in the same university. The impetus for developing an innovative practically-based model of higher education in the hospitality field arose from the stakeholder vision for a more flexible and dynamic higher education landscape promoting work readiness.

All Hospitality School courses combine theory and practical skills development through practical experience in the House Hotel. A key and unique aspect of the School is the embedded practical experience at the House Hotel, an 18th Century listed building run as a country house hotel at the edge of the University campus, owned and managed through the university as a subsidiary company. It is important to stress, that the House Hotel is not a training hotel, but a real-life commercial country hotel where students, employers and hospitality professionals come together for both work-related and learning purposes. Students are engaged with various aspects of practice-based working and learning, and they do this as part of their degree studies, spending about two thirds of their time in the hotel. Crossing boundaries between higher education and work is a continuous process, enabling students to apply their academic knowledge to their hands-on experience within the context of a real-life workplace space. This model is unique in its set up and operation in the UK, and it takes joint efforts of various stakeholder (such as academic staff, employers, students) to develop approaches and strategies to enhance and sustain this model. The key element of the model is what the School refers to as action based learning, with a strong focus on integrating academic and work based learning on an ongoing basis.

Field research was conducted between September 2019 and April 2020, involving two site visits to the University, the Hospitality School and the House Hotel. Both individual and group interviews with staff, students and employers have been undertaken, as well as additional telephone interviews and conversation with key stakeholders at key events. Altogether, interviews were carried out with 8 staff members at the House Hotel, Hospitality School and the University, 28 current students or recent graduates of the School, as well as 2 stakeholders including a stakeholder from a hospitality company collaborating with the School 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 our findings. 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.

The case study of the Hospitality School illustrates the ways innovative approaches, good practice and collaborative efforts of different stakeholders support students to navigate and cross

<sup>1</sup>For ethical considerations, the names of the school, the university and the commercial hotel have been anonymised. Thereafter, they are referred to as the Hospitality School or School, the University, and the House Hotel.



boundaries between their academic and workplace learning spaces, enhancing the way theory is integrated and embedded in practical activities on an ongoing basis.

## DISCUSSION

### Integrating 'academic' and 'practical' learning: (co) - constructing practically-based learning spaces

Our findings indicate that co-constructing practically based higher education learning spaces requires joint efforts of all stakeholders involved in this process (i.e. learners, university lecturers, employers). The highly integrated nature of the Hospitality School 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. One of the distinctive features is that this model provides continuous opportunities for embedded practice-based learning through rotations in various hotel departments. The students have the chance to engage with the different departments in the hotel, such as housekeeping, reception, the food and beverage department. Overall, what this leads to is the idea of industry readiness at graduation, specifically developing strategic, managerial and professional skills, not just through their academic study, but through the direct experience of the operative roles at the hotel, in addition, to the academic experience. The idea behind that is that once students graduate, and take up positions within the hospitality sector e.g. managerial role, they will have had direct experience of 'what it's like on the ground'.

The integration between theory and practice is something that is strongly embedded into teaching and learning practices. The relevance of academic lectures and tutorials to 'real-life' operations in the hotel is being continuously drawn on and highlighted by both academic staff members and hotel professionals involved with this programme. Therefore, working in real life hotel settings allows students to apply learning from their university lectures in practice. Student theoretical knowledge acquired from their classroom-based sessions and tutorials, underpins their practical engagement with 'live' key business data (such as hotel reviews, budget or accounts information). The work-based learning during rotations in different departments at the Hotel provides affordances for co-constructing practically-based learning spaces, enabling the students to contextualise their theoretical knowledge into the 'real life context'.

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, the Hospitality School].

In the example above, the integration of practical and academic knowledge is achieved by joint engagement of academic staff, students and hotel professionals. As a result the conventional class-room based learning has been contextualised into the practice-based context of real life



business activities in the hotel. Our data have further indicated that 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. Their coursework provides further affordances for the students to facilitate theory-practice integration are:

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, BA in Hospitality].

Such a set-up, enables the students to exercise their confidence within their work-related tasks, at the same time, while constructing a real-life working context, there is also an overlap with a somewhat protected learning space, allowing room for learning through mistakes, learning by doing and improving practice. As extremely valuable practical learning activities, students specifically underlined their day-to-day experience in customer service (e.g. reception), which offered opportunities to handle a range of real-life problems, and this, contributes to the development of a range of industry-related skills, making students ‘job-ready’ within the hospitality sector:

[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, BA in Hospitality]

Describing the practical learning opportunities offered by the programme, students interviewed have discussed the ways their direct contact with hotel customers provides continuous boundary crossing between their learning (academic) and working (practical) spaces, thus, bringing together their theoretical knowledge and practical experience. In addition, the experience of the full range of hotel departments was considered to offer valuable insights, creating a space that promotes their future credibility as managers in the hospitality industry.

There are some limitations and barriers, however, that, as students highlighted, may challenge their perception of the real-life working space in the hotel. Students make a point that it’s important to underline that the House Hotel is not a training school, and they strongly reject a labelling of the hotel as a ‘training school’ by customers, considering that this undermines the real-life workplace environment 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 [Hospitality 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, BA in Events Management]

Loosing a sense of workplace reality has been cited as a barrier that may make it challenging to co-construct a real-life workplace environments within their higher education learning settings.





## The role of stakeholders in fostering practically-based higher education: towards industry engagement

***Industry engaged higher education: fostering professionalism and resilience.*** Another important configuration of practically-based higher education is underpinned by the notion of industry-engaged higher education. This feature makes the Hospitality School programme distinct in the perspectives of all stakeholders interviewed for the research. Industry engagement runs through the whole of the programme (including consultancy projects, career events, guest lectures). Our data indicate that it supports the development of students' professional identity and facilitates their motivation and learning attitudes. There is continuous dialogue and interactions between the School and industry representatives, which contributes to networking and collaboration. Industry networks are proactively maintained by the School, specifically through building and sustaining long term relationships, communication, mutual learning, support and trust. These are seen as key distinctive features of the provision, and industry engagement runs through the whole of the programme and is facilitated through targeted activities and approaches:

[...] 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, the School].

The academic and professional identities of teaching staff, who have experience in the industry, also contribute to both the climate of mutual trust and continuous collaborations.

Our interviews with both the School staff and employers have demonstrated that the practically-based model has been perceived as a quality 'brand' filling a gap in hospitality education, fostering the practically-based elements of the programme.

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 [...]. [Academic staff member].

Being 'oven ready' from the perspective of employers is strongly associated with the fact that graduates of the Hospitality School are considered to demonstrate high levels of professionalism alongside strong academic performance, supporting them to become 'rounded' professional personalities. As noted by a management staff member in the House Hotel, the significance of work-place learning is a key to success in developing employability skills:

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].





Furthermore, the notion of professionalism is something that permeates the programme:

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 academic leadership member].

Enhancing professional practice is strongly facilitated through the interplay of rigorous academic study and embedded real-life work experience throughout their course. What is important, as described by the member of the School leadership team, is that the realistic workplace environment provides affordances for industry-relevant education:

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 [Hospitality School leadership team member].

The key idea is that the students develop their professional skills, and become 'industry engaged' even before their graduate. This is closely related to developing and exercising their professional attitudes, represented, for example, through their conduct and dress codes. Our interviews with industry representatives suggest that this strongly contributes not only to professionalism but also to high levels of resilience, which, is an extremely valuable skills within the hospitality sector:

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 [the 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 [Hospitality School] students ... Resilience is the right word. Academically strong and very resilient. [Industry representative].

As described through our interviews by key stakeholders, a strong focus on industry engaged education is about building bridges between theory and practice within the hospitality sector. Employer engagement is demonstrated a range of activities, such as guest lecturers, career fairs, opportunities for short terms placements with other hotels. At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the School has been developing contingency arrangements to manage any further impact of Covid-19. In particular, the School has been embracing digital means to sustain both student and industry engagement (e.g. online guest lectures and career events).

***Industry engaged higher education: stakeholder involvement.*** Our interviews also indicated that industry engagement both requires and facilitates mutual learning and exchange. Continuous collaboration and fostering links between industry and higher education has been highlighted as mutually beneficial. Employer perspectives have underlined the value of higher education in terms of '*educating the industry*' and introducing '*a wider view of the world*'. While acknowledging some tensions between theory and practice, academia and industry, employers have underlined the significance of working together, *and bringing in people in with a different background and different worldview*:

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, there are a number of approaches undertaken by the Hospitality School. A key concern that all guest lectures need to be relevant to students' learning and work-related activities. In addition, engagement with industry representatives provides opportunities for the students to build and develop their networking within the hospitality industry. Industry contacts and networks are continuously developed and sustained by the School:

. . .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 [The Hospitality School leadership team member].

An important example of embedded industry-engagement is the consultancy project undertaken in the final year, where a real-life problem provided by industry partners is tackled by students in small groups. Employers collaborating with the Hospitality School on this project note that it provides invaluable opportunities for the students to apply academic knowledge to real-life issues of key relevance to the industry:

The consultancy projects [in the Hospitality School] 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 is being appreciated by students, as a key opportunity to demonstrate and apply their academic learning and practical skills to address a real life problem. This is also the chance to start building their networks, make contacts and collaborate with potential employers as the project involves ongoing contact with the industry partners. 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 ways students construct their learning and working space to engage with this activity.

Overall, the employer support of the 'industry-readiness' concept has been demonstrated through their involvements and participation in aspects of education, such as guest lectures, hosting field trips, supporting conference and events, as well as individual scholarships. Our data from conversations with industry representatives and alumni have indicated how highly these



industry engagement activities were valued as distinctive elements of the practically based model:

... 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 having the exam, it's not the end but part of the journey [Industry representative].

The uniqueness of the School practically-based model has been strongly underpinned by both industry engagement and continuous efforts and collaboration of the hotel professionals, academic staff members and wider employer and stakeholders, enabling students to benefit from both rigorous academic teaching and learning and real-life practical experience.

## CONCLUSION

The consideration of the case study of the Hospitality School has indicated the ways practically-based learning spaces can be constructed and co-constructed within the context of higher education. The key elements of this model relate to facilitating industry engagement, integrating theory and practice and providing opportunities for students to develop both professionalism and resilience. In sustaining stakeholder engagement, the School aims to foster collaborative networks and practices, and this contribute to the notion of socially connected and networked perspective (Bridgstock & Tippett, 2019), specifically, on practically based higher education. The overall approach undertaken by a range of stakeholders (e.g. university lecturers, hotel staff, employers and learners) strongly relates to contextualising theory (academic learning) and practical activities. In this process practically based learning spaces emerge are co-constructed spaces, involving joint efforts of all stakeholders. The affordances of the learning space in the workplace contribute to a better understanding of the extent to which learners are motivated to embark on a range of practical learning opportunities available to them. Applying their theoretical learning to practical activities enables the learning to perceive their academic studies as meaningful and strongly connected to their future professional careers and employability. The context of the workplace has been identified as a significant indicator of different configurations of learning at work, including informal learning, where the environment has been traditionally described as 'beyond the classroom' settings (Edwards et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2006). When learning occurring in settings other than the classroom is often associated with a more positive perception of learning and professional skills development.

The hospitality sector has been particularly affected by the current social and economic challenges, caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The unprecedented character of the pandemic and public lockdown measures in response to the crisis have contributed to uncertainty for the hospitality industry as well as the higher education sector. This situation has posed a variety of further challenges for the Hospitality School. The School has responded to the situation by implementing alternative teaching methods online and modifying the curriculum in the short term. At the same time, as Child (2020) puts it, the coronavirus crisis has created an opportunity to reflect on how a more effective system of social collaboration and learning could contribute to more effective addressing of other challenges of a more enduring nature. Specifically taking into account participative solutions to many of the contemporary problems which will continue to



exist post-Covid (Child, 2020: 2–3). The Hospitality School has developed a concept to continue with its industry-engaged concepts by balancing digital engagement with direct, face to face engagement when it is safe to do so. In addition there is strong focus on addressing the current challenges through long term planning with a strong emphasis on post-pandemic reconstruction, innovation and sustainability.

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