

Student article

Experiencing, Learning and Challenging through Booster Weekend Activities

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I am a Chinese student, studying MSc Human Resource Management (HRM) at the University of Birmingham. After my graduation from Zhejiang University and two years of work experience, I wanted to gain specialized knowledge; I was quite interested in HRM, so I decided to study this further in the UK.

Before taking the modules on the degree program, a pre-session English course is absolutely essential for international students to improve our language and study skills so that we can adapt to our new learning environment. In this article, I seek to share my experiences of the Booster Weekend activity, which is a group activity in the Business Management English (BME) pre-session course at the University of Birmingham. I explain reasons of choosing BME course, basic knowledge of Booster Weekend Activities, and how the issues of time limitation, language barriers, and differing learning experience provided our greatest challenges but also resulted in our most beneficial learning experience: through facing these challenges, I and my group mates emerged with stronger teamwork spirit, wiser time arrangement, and enhanced problem-solving abilities, all of which have “boosted” our capabilities to succeed on our course and beyond.

The reason why I chose the 6-week BME pre-session is because this course was very well designed in terms of lecture content, time arrangement and diverse activities. Firstly, the course was divided into four sessions: Reading, Writing, Listening and Presentation Skills, which were consistent with the basic requirements of study. Additionally, we had a weekly Case Study Analysis class: There was a business topic set for each week, and everything we learnt was closely related to it, such as financial reports, customer service, etc. Secondly, the 6-week length felt appropriate for me to prepare for Master’s studies as well as to adapt to a new living environment in the UK. I also had spare time to discover the city on weekends. Thirdly, apart from intensive classes, the BME organized various activities, including guest lectures, day trips and themed parties to enrich our learning experiences.

Booster Weekend was an exclusive activity of the BME, which I considered the most helpful part of the course. It was our first group activity on the pre-session, and it was also the first time that this activity had been set over a weekend instead of a week, meaning that it would be a challenge for both students and teachers. The groups were allocated randomly, so we were unfamiliar with our members at first, but we had to work with each other on the basis of mutual trust. English was the only way to communicate since different nationalities were involved. This was extremely beneficial for oral English and communication skills enhancement.

The main tasks of Booster Weekend were as follows: each of the groups was assigned a case study, and we were asked to analyze the case using a business model different from the one given in the case. We had to present our analysis in two forms: the first was through an A1

size poster, which we had to design within only three days, and the second was through the delivery of a group presentation the following week. The only input we received from our teachers was a 30-minute briefing, followed by a one-hour class where we could pose questions after brainstorming together as a group. To be honest, none of us had ever encountered such a demanding activity; therefore most of us felt some stress, or even panic.

We encountered various challenges during the whole process of preparation, but there was no route of retreat, so we had to figure out how to overcome our difficulties. Time limitation, I would say, was the biggest challenge. People felt lost and confused at the beginning: Which business model should we choose? How should we divide tasks? How do we design the poster...and so on. For example, our group's case was Portakabin. After reading the case, five of us just looked at each other blankly, because nobody had a clue where to start. Due to our limited knowledge of the company and its background, we had to search for a large amount of information to support our arguments; so most of us stayed up late to complete individual tasks and then embraced another round of discussion the next day.

The language barrier and variation in strength within the group were like a wall between us at times. How to transfer information in proper English to make our ideas understandable was quite challenging, but our members listened to each other carefully and explained patiently until everybody got the point. Besides, different personalities and learning styles occasionally made it more difficult to cooperate. For instance, some group members liked to take initiatives while others preferred to take on tasks delegated to them by others. In this case, we combined each other's strengths to offset the weaknesses: we first analysed the feasibility of the ideas and then distributed tasks according to members' strengths. Take our poster designer as an example: even though she was unfamiliar with the computer program, she had a great sense of style and creativity, so she was willing to try out ideas through learning by doing and finally made an outstanding poster.

In spite of the challenges and hard work, our considerable achievements and the learning outcomes made them worthwhile. First of all, the most important thing we learned was to use teamwork to complete a task, maximizing members' strengths, capabilities and potentials. Everyone within the group had to make their own efforts towards the final accomplishment; otherwise it could by no means guarantee positive results. When facing conflicts or disagreements, we analysed the current situation calmly trying to figure out the best solution for the project that everyone agreed with. Communication skills were largely enhanced whilst interacting with members, and using English as a tool to present our work made us more confident, which was also indispensable to survive in a multicultural environment.

Secondly, to meet the challenge of time limitation, we prioritized tasks to use our limited time effectively, which enabled us to finish everything before the deadline. Our strategy was that the most important and most difficult thing came first. For example, PESTEL was appointed as our business model to analyze the case, so members were allocated one or two factors each, because the completion of our analysis was essential and the poster and presentation design would come later. This approach worked because, although everyone was working under great pressure during the weekend, the results turned out to be encouraging and satisfying: the poster designed by our group even won first place, and the presentation gained a lot of compliments. "All the groups accomplished the project on time and did a surprisingly fantastic job" said a member of the BME crew.

Overall, the activity gave us a great opportunity to put what we had learned into practice. Our previous lectures had provided us with some theoretical knowledge about business models, and Booster Weekend became an application platform allowing us to try out our learning and analytical abilities. Furthermore, I believe this activity was also helpful for leadership development. As our group leader, I was responsible for the equal distribution of tasks according to members' skills and capabilities, setting the timetable and balancing different ideas. In other words, I personally gained extra valuable leadership experiences from the activity.

In conclusion, the Booster Weekend was such a rewarding and interesting activity that each member gained tremendous benefits from it. In spite of the stressful hard work, we had our confidence boosted and analytical ability enhanced. Particularly, being involved in an internationally diverse group provided a great opportunity for me to practice my English and therefore develop communication skills, as well as understand other's cultural backgrounds. Hence, the friendships formed within our group have lasted long after, as since then, we have been collaborating to overcome a lot of difficulties. Also, no matter what modules we take for our Master's degree, the courses involve a large amount of group work, so the BME Booster Weekend activity gave us memorable lessons.

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