

Conference Paper 2

Tse, T., Wong, S. & Luk, C. (2007). Work-integrated education: a student perspective. International Forum on Tourism Education. Guilin, China. 12-13 December 2007.

Work-integrated Education: A Student Perspective

Abstract

Gaining work experience during the course of a study has been a practice in many academic curricula. However internship programmes are often considered as unstructured and poorly organized and students generally complain about the quality. Student perception scores about internship are lower than expectation scores, implying that there is quality shortfall in internship. This study is to gain a more in-depth understanding of placement experience from student's perspective and to suggest ways to enhance the experience. The objectives of this study are: (1) to understand placement experience from student's perspective, and (2) to find out how placement can be made more effective from student's perspective. The study attempts to find out possible solutions to the problem which has already been well identified in past studies on hospitality internship.

Key words: Placement, internship, work-integrated education

Introduction

Gaining work experience during the course of a study programme to complement traditional form of classroom learning has been a practice in many academic curricula, particularly in hospitality management. Such practice known as placement, internship, cooperative education, experiential education, or work-integration education in different academic institutions is believed to be important for students to gain hands-on experience in workplace, practise textbook theories and skills, and reflect upon their future career development. However internship programmes are often considered as unstructured and poorly organized and students generally complain about the quality and it appears that many hospitality students, through exposure to the subject and industry, become considerably less interested in selecting hospitality as their career of first choice (Jenkins, 2001). This study is to gain a more in-depth understanding of placement experience from student's perspective and to suggest ways to enhance the experience.

Past studies on hospitality student internship

In their study of hospitality internships, Downey & DeVeau (1988) expounded views of the industry and concluded that more internship hours, better coordination, and more documentation in terms of both written and oral reporting were needed.

Pauze, Johnson & Miller (1989) studied the structure and core components of internship model and strategy for hospitality management programmes, and identified the following factors contributing to programme characteristics: geographic location and industry resources, university administrative support, industry management time, faculty commitment, faculty/property communication, competency based rotation, formal application process, interpersonal workshops, mock interview, student interview and selection, and internship progression based on demonstrated competence.

Collins (2002) conducted a study among 113 students at Bilkent University's School of Tourism and Hotel Management in Turkey, and made a number of suggestions for their Industrial Training Coordination Office (ITCO). The suggestions included holding orientation for students before undertaking their placement, having a professional control system to monitor the industrial training experience, holding mid-term intern review to gauge the progress, and reviewing the grading system to emphasize the importance of placement.

In designing a programme of cooperative education, Wilson (2002) suggested dealing with the organization, administration and staffing to be important. He considered the principal pedagogical issues to be who will establish the learning objectives, select the appropriate learning experiences, and conduct an evaluation of learning, and what will be the learning objectives, learning experiences, and the means of evaluation. He also believed that curriculum planning is the responsibility of the teaching faculty and the cooperative education professionals attached to that faculty working together.

Lam & Ching (2007) conducted a study among students from four hospitality schools and colleges in Hong Kong with a total of 307 usable questionnaires. The study found that all the student perception scores about internship were lower than expectation scores, implying that there is quality shortfall in internship. The study made the point that schools should involve students and employers to participate in the planning stage by inviting them to sit in meetings before consolidating a training programme for students; and schools should collect information about needs and interests of students as well as employers.

Cho (2006) conducted a study among students from seven colleges in Korea, and 285 completed surveys were collected. The study concluded that there was a significant level of discrepancy between satisfaction and expectations indicating that expectations were not fully met. The respondents were not satisfied with the quality of the internship.

Purpose of this study

It should be a concern that student internship satisfaction is compromised. While the three stakeholders, academic institutions, students, and employer organizations form the triangular relationship determining the success of internships, the quality of placement experience varies according to many factors which are out of academic institution's control. Such factors include employer organization's sense of social responsibility, commitment to education, availability of training positions, coaching ability of supervisors, physical work environment and people environment. If academic institution is concerned with the quality of placement, student's perspective cannot be ignored. This study is intended to gain an in-depth understanding of student's view of placement experience. The objectives of this study are: (1) to understand placement experience from student's perspective, and (2) to find out how placement can be made more effective from student's perspective. The study attempts to find out possible solutions to the problem which has already been well identified in past studies on hospitality internship.

Research method

The researchers of this study invited 15 students including eight hospitality students and seven non-hospitality students who had just completed internship organized by the university in 2006 or 2007 to participate in a group discussion or telephone interview. Eight students from the School of Hotel & Tourism Management (SHTM) participated in a group discussion on 13 June 2007; three students from the Faculty of Applied Science and Textiles (FAST), Faculty of Business (FB) and School of Design (SD) participated in a group discussion on 21 June 2007; and four students from the Faculty of Business were interviewed by telephone on 18 August 2007. The group discussions were conducted by the researchers, and the telephone interview was conducted by a research assistant.

The internship undertaken by the 15 students cover industries in hotel, theme park, accounting, banking, biotechnology, design, real estate services, and transportation, and placement locations include Hong Kong, Shanghai, the UK, and the US. Table 1 shows the information of the students interviewed, their placement organization and location.

Table 1: List of students participated in the interview

	Name	Faculty / School	Placement Organization	Location
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1.	Chan K.L.	FB, Year 2	Jones Lang LaSalle Ltd.	Hong Kong
2.	Chan K. Y.	SHTM, Year 3	JW Marriott Hotel Hong Kong	Hong Kong
3.	Chow Jenny	FB, Year 2	MTR Corporation Ltd.	Hong Kong
4.	Chu Anna	SHTM, Year 3	Renaissance Kowloon Hotel	Hong Kong
5.	Fung Amy	FAST, Year 3	Planet Biotechnology	Hayward, USA
6.	Ho Carol	SHTM, Year 2	Walt Disney World Royal Plaza Hotel	Orlando, USA Hong Kong
7.	Hung Daisy	SHTM, Year 2	The Isle of Eriska, Hotel, Spa & Island	Argyll, Scotland, UK
8.	Kwan Mandy	SHTM, Year 2	The Excelsior, Hong Kong	Hong Kong
9.	Kwan Valerie	SHTM, Year 2	The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong	Hong Kong
10.	Lee P.Y.	FB, Year 2	Shanghai Dong-hua CPAs Firm Co. Ltd.	Shanghai, China
11.	Leung Daniel	SHTM, Year 2	The Marco Polo Hotel Group	Hong Kong
12.	So Isobel	SHTM, Year 3	The American Club	Hong Kong
13.	Tai Phyllis	FB, Year 3	Citibank, Hong Kong Branch	Hong Kong
14.	Tsui K.S.	FB, Year 2	Grant Thornton	Hong Kong
15.	Wong May	SD, Year 3	Whitespace Hong Kong Ltd.	Hong Kong

Discussion

The interview is divided into two sections with questions related to (1) how students benefit from the internship programme and (2) how the programme could be more beneficial to students. Semi-structured interview is used with specified questions but it also allows more probing to seek clarification and elaboration. Open-ended questions are used throughout the interview to understand the perspective of the interviewee and the meanings that the interviewee attaches to situations and contexts important to him or her (Finn, Elliott-White & Walton, 2000). Students with internship experience in hospitality industry and other industries are invited to participate in this study to help identify if there are any differences between experiences of these two types of students, and if learning can be found in internship programmes other than that of hospitality. The student feedback is analyzed and categorized under three themes: (1) preparation before internship, (2) learning during internship, and (3) administrative arrangement.

1. Preparation before internship

The student respondents believe that preparation before internship is very important. They suggested that university could help them better-prepared for internship by providing detail information about the placement organization and job duties. “If the relevant detail information about individual companies and job duties of the internship could be provided in advance, it would help students identify internship that best matches their interests and enhances the learning experience”, said Carol Ho. Information about the placement is particularly important in the case of overseas placement. Daisy Hung said, “More extensive preparation may be required for students undertaking internship in foreign countries. It would be helpful if university could also provide related information of the work environment and living environment”. “Students may obtain a lot of useful information if university could arrange a session for them to meet with those students who had previously completed similar internship for experience sharing”, said Daniel Leung.

The students also find the work environment very different to the school environment, and they suggest university to coordinate some pre-placement training workshops such as interpersonal skills and work ethics to help them adapt to the work environment more quickly. Clear guidelines such as insurance policy and regulations about internship programme should also be provided before placement.

The students also believe that they themselves have to make an effort to prepare for internship. Daniel Leung suggested, “One should develop his or her psychological readiness before taking up an internship”. “One should consider carefully from different angles before accepting an internship”, supplemented Carol Ho. Phyllis Tai and May Wong also propose that students should be trained of interview techniques and acquire a good understanding of the company background before attending an interview or before reporting duty.

2. Learning during internship

University can help student learning by providing continuous support. Site visit by lecturers is very much appreciated by students on internship. Both Mandy Kwan and Isobel So say that they need someone who is experienced to consult with when they encounter difficulties during internship, which is particularly important at the beginning of an internship since students are new to the workplace. Daniel Leung, on the other hand,

points out that student should not rely too much on others, and should cultivate a positive attitude towards internship.

The students agree that they should learn to become responsible during internship as he or she is seen as a representative of the university. They know they have to learn the basics and accept simple and sometimes tedious duties. Amy Fung and May Wong suggest that student interns must take the initiative to ask their colleagues if they have any question, and they may also learn through observation in the workplace. The students realize that they could find room for improvement if they are cooperative in attitude and are open to accept criticism.

“We should take the opportunity to associate textbook theories with realities, and sometimes try to challenge those theories based on our experience in the workplace. What we experience in the real work environment may be very different from what’s taught in the university,” said Phyllis Tai. The students realize that they should take the internship opportunity to acquire the practical experience to help career development.

3. Administrative arrangement

Administrative arrangement by placement organization is important to ensure the success of internship. Phyllis Tai said, “Organizations are suggested to provide a training plan and discuss the plan with students at the beginning of a placement. The training plan helps the student interns see how the internship is arranged and its requirements”.

The students also find it desirable to have a workplace mentor who is not just a coach but also the right person students could approach if they experience any difficulty in their daily work. “Orientation is a useful tool to help students adapt to the work environment. In addition, students may exchange their learning experiences and important information through regular trainee meeting and sharing sessions arranged by organizations,” according to Valerie Kwan. It would be an invaluable experience for student interns if exposure in different departments and regular feedback can be provided to them. Mandy Kwan proposes that “organizations should invite students to prepare a presentation at the end of internship because it helps students recall and reflect what they have learned from the placement experience”.

The findings of this study would help students become better prepared before undertaking an internship and ensure a more effective learning process during internship, and help employer

organizations decide how efforts and resources should be deployed to make internship arrangement more beneficial to the students. The ultimate objective is to better integrate the work experience in education and enhance the quality of placement.

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