

Conference Paper 3

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How does placement affect student's self-perception?

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. Admittedly students may gain intellectually in two ways through placement. Firstly, they may learn practical skills in dealing with customers, application of software, work procedures and ethos, etc. Secondly, they may unconsciously undergo an attitude change. This study is to gain an understanding of how placement experience could have affected students' attitude about themselves in relation to a workplace environment.

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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 of and strategy for placement in hospitality management programmes, and identified the following success factors: 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.

Busby & Brunt (1997), in their survey of 33 placement employers, found that sandwich placement plays a key role in providing students with additional skills and understanding prior to their final degree year, and employers expected tourism graduates to possess an added value that differentiates them as prospective employees.

Collins (2001) conducted a study among 113 students at Bilkent University's School of Tourism and Hotel Management in Turkey, and suggested 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.

Jenkins (2001) considered internship programmes as unstructured and poorly organized and found that 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.

Lam & Ching (2006) 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.

Objectives

While past studies show that there are issue and concerns with student placement, it is actually very difficult to gauge what students might have learnt or gained in terms of actual skill and practice during placement. Unlike academic subjects, there are no pre-determined achievement criteria which can be applied across all kinds of placement and there is no examination to assess the achievement in placement. It is however believed that students might have gained an attitude change, hopefully in a positive direction, through placement

experience. Such attitude change can be gauged by self-evaluation or change in self-perception. This study, through a survey among students who have completed their placement, will provide an understanding of how placement experience might have affected students' attitude about themselves in relation to the workplace environment.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To assess the impact of placement on students' attitude.
2. To examine if there is any difference between the impacts of placement on hospitality students and non-hospitality students.

Methodology

161 hospitality students and 164 non-hospitality students in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University were invited to join the survey in 2007 to gauge their attitudes before and after their placement.

The hospitality students are asked to rate themselves on 19 statements based on a Likert-scale of "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree", both before and after their placement. Non-hospitality students are asked to rate themselves on 17 statements because two statements are not relevant to them. The ratings reflect the students' self-perception in respect of the statements. The change in ratings is an indication of how student attitude or self-perception has changed before and after placement.

The 19 statements are:

1. I am honest
2. I am willing to accept responsibility
3. I have genuine desire to help people
4. I am able to work cooperatively with others such as a team member
5. I have interest in joining this profession
6. I am adaptable and flexible to cope with a changing work environment
7. I am able to work independently with minimal supervision
8. I possess good professional attitude
9. I possess effective reading skills
10. I possess effective writing skills
11. I am creative
12. I can manage other people's problems with understanding and sensitivity
13. I can define and solve problems effectively

14. I can communicate effectively in foreign language
15. I have good presentation skills
16. I can lead others effectively
17. I have updated professional knowledge
18. I have good understanding about relevant computer software for our profession
19. I have extensive knowledge about the workplace in at least one department

The data collected are analyzed with descriptive statistics, t-test and one-way ANOVA.

Survey results

Both hospitality and non-hospitality students' self-perception is enhanced in most cases before and after their placement. The survey results indicate that self-perception of the students has a significantly positive shift before and after placement in 15 statements among the 17 statements.

Further analysis shows that the enhancement in self-perception before and after placement is more marked among hospitality students than non-hospitality students. The survey results indicate that the self-perception has a significantly positive shift in all 19 statements among hospitality students before and after placement, compared to 8 statements among non-hospitality students.

Further comparison is made between hospitality and non-hospitality students in their self-perception after placement. The survey results indicate that the mean scores of all 17 statements after placement are significantly higher among hospitality students than non-hospitality students.

The data are also analyzed in terms of location of placement. Mean scores among students who have undertaken placement in Hong Kong, mainland China and overseas are analyzed. The results indicate that the mean scores of 17 out of the 19 statements after placement are significantly higher for those students who have undertaken placement in Hong Kong, i.e., home city, than those students who have undertaken placement in mainland or overseas.

Students after placement rate themselves highest in the following five statements, showing that placement has a positive impact on students' work attitude:

- I am now able to accept responsibility (4.16)
- I am able to work co-operatively as a team member (4.01)

- I am honest (3.99)
- I have acquired genuine desire to help people (3.92)
- I am adaptable and flexible to cope with a changing work environment (3.90)

Students before placement rated themselves lowest in the following three statements, indicating the areas which students need help most:

- I have updated professional knowledge (2.91)
- I have good understanding about relevant computer software for our profession (2.89)
- I have extensive knowledge about the workplace in at least one department (2.71)

Among student comments about industry partners, the most mentioned item is “There should be more job rotation”. Among comments about the University, the two most mentioned items are “There is not enough communication or feedback from mentor” and “48 weeks of placement is too long”. Among comments about students themselves, the most mentioned item is “Students can gain valuable practical experience”.

Discussion

It is encouraging to note that the survey shows significantly positive shift in self-perception among students before and after placement. Students might have subconsciously gained confidence, become more helpful, cooperative and responsible, through work practice. Through dealing with peers and customers, students might have become more understanding, sensitive and professional. This shows that placement does serve the basic purpose of imparting a professional and mature attitude to students through work practice.

The survey shows that hospitality students show significantly stronger shift in self-perception than non-hospitality students. This could be attributed to the fact that hospitality students are required to attend structured pre-placement tutorials to prepare them for placement and allocate the most suitable placement. Non-hospitality students did not undergo such structured pre-placement tutorials. The other factor could be attributed to the fact that hospitality industry is more attuned to student placement than other industries. Some organizations in the hospitality industry have well-planned training programme for student interns, they provide opportunities for student interns to practise, and they provide coaching.

The survey shows that students undertaking placement in their home city exhibit stronger shift in self-perception than students undertaking placement outside of their home city. The

finding is unexpected, and this could be explained by the fact that students working outside of their home city might have spread their attention to a new work environment, a new living environment as well as a new culture. Such students could have gained more in cross-cultural sensitivity and independence.

Students in general agree that they have gained valuable work experience through placement, and they would like to have more job rotation so that they could gain experience in a wider spectrum, and they would like to have a stronger link with the university during placement so that they feel more secure.

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