

Understanding of Student Perspective Needed for More Effective Internships

Internships are a fundamental part of hospitality and tourism education, even though their effectiveness is sometimes called into question. Practical work experience is crucial for aligning students with future careers, and the SHTM's Dr Tony Tse has identified a way to make them more relevant to students, academic institutions and the hospitality and tourism industry itself. In a recently published research article Dr Tse reviews placement reports from SHTM students and shows that "knowing what students perceive to be important and valuable in their workplace experiences is vital to ensuring the success of internships".

Benefits and Limitations of Internships

As part of an increasing trend towards compulsory work experience in academic curricula, internships offer hospitality and tourism students two distinct benefits. They can, writes Dr Tse, both develop practical work skills and "acquire supervisory and managerial skills by practice and observation". Yet there is a widely held understanding that students do not always judge their placements very positively. Some are even dissuaded by their internship experiences from joining the hospitality industry after graduation.

Part of this problem lies in some interns considering themselves too highly educated to fill the positions they are given during placements. There is also something of a mismatch between the academic focus on "conceptual and analytical skills" and the industry interest in supervisory experience. To overcome this discrepancy, argues Dr Tse, "the industry and educators must work together to ensure that students have positive and enriching experiences during their internships".

An In-Depth Examination

How, then, can we assess what students consider particularly valuable about internships? Dr Tse analysed

the placement reports of 279 SHTM students who had undertaken compulsory Work-integrated Education. The reports, written by students who had completed 10 or 48-week placements in Hong Kong, mainland China and abroad, describe experiences, related likes and dislikes, outlined what was learned and provided suggestions for receiving organisations.

Submitted by hotel management and tourism management students alike, Dr Tse argues that the reports offered rich, well thought out responses that could not have been obtained in interviews or through a questionnaire. He used the themes that emerged from the reports to identify nine main areas of concern, in order of importance: the student's working relationship with colleagues, perception of personal growth, practical skills acquired, perceived contribution to the receiving organisation, relevance of the internship to study and future career, experience with leadership, methods of overcoming problems and difficulties encountered.

Student Perceptions of Internships

It is particularly worth focusing on the two most important themes identified because they encapsulate the major elements of an intern's experience – working effectively with others and developing skills that are not specific to the job at hand.

In the first instance, Dr Tse notes that "students attach great importance to their working relationships with colleagues, probably because those relationships are perceived as the work experience itself". It should be apparent, then, that staff members who work with interns could very much enhance the internship experience by being friendly, showing their care, communicating clearly, accepting that interns make mistakes and setting an example by working diligently themselves.

Dr Tse makes the often overlooked point that when interns like their colleagues and those colleagues are willing to coach, the relationship becomes strong. The bond expands the scope of that interns can learn and ultimately improves their overall perception of the organisation. The added benefit is that this process also shows the industry in a more positive light than that in which it is sometime seen by interns.

Another benefit is that interns who are happier in their placements will inevitably have more self-confidence, which will enhance their willingness to learn. From this perspective, Dr Tse reports that the students saw personal growth – as evidenced by developing generic skills such as the ability to better communicate, language skills (especially in overseas placements) and time management – as “the major benefit of placement”. In other words, the interns realised that they could acquire skills in their placements that would stand them in good stead in any workplace. The internship essentially becomes a valuable career starting point.

Dr Tse suggests that the academic institutions should reinforce the potential for personal growth before and after placements to ensure that students see the experience from a career perspective. He also notes that receiving organisations should help interns identify the skills they see as most important and valuable for their future careers to make the value of their internships more explicit as they progress.

From a broader perspective, two of the remaining themes identified are worth noting in a little more detail. Dr Tse mentions that student perceptions of whether they contribute to their receiving organisations are significant because they give interns a sense of importance in what they do. Although any contributions are likely to be small, receiving organisations should acknowledge them and give interns “the opportunity to make tangible contributions.”

Experience with leadership is also a less tangible element of internships, although the students indicated they had “experienced a wide range of leadership traits”. To build

on this and make it a stronger element of the internship experience, Dr Tse suggests that interns could be specifically “guided to appreciate how leadership works in an organisation”.

Academic and Industry Collaboration Needed

Given “the alarming situation” of internships actually discouraging some students from joining the industry, there is a solution at hand. Equipped with the nine themes Dr Tse identifies, both academic institutions and receiving organisations can reconsider their roles in the placement process. Academic institutions should better prepare students for their internships, particularly by focusing their expectations and helping them to better understand the career-long benefits of placements. The receiving organisations, in turn, could reorient the ways in which they handle interns to make learning outcomes more tangible.

The ultimate goal should be enhanced academic-industry collaboration to provide higher quality internships that ensure a motivated, skilful and aspirational future management workforce.

Points to Note

- Internships are crucial to hospitality and tourism education.
- Yet student interns do not always benefit from their placements.
- A greater focus on the student perspective is needed to enhance the effectiveness of internships.
- More academic-industry collaboration will ensure higher quality placement experiences.

Tse, Tony S. M. (2010). “What do Hospitality Students Find Important about Internships?” *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism*, Vol. 10, pp. 251-264.