Challenges to Achieving a Successful Hospitality Internship Program in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Researchers have recognized the benefits and importance of having successful internship programs for all relevant stakeholders; students, universities and employers. Despite these significances, internship is found to be provocative as previous studies revealed the challenges perceived by undergraduates and employers. Nonetheless, researchers underlook the challenges perceived by internship coordinators in terms of placement, assessment and cooperation given by undergraduates and employers. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the challenges to achieving a successful internship program in the hospitality industry. The findings derived from seven internship coordinators in public universities that offered hospitality degree programs throughout Malaysia. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Seven themes were extracted as the challenges of this study, namely: 1) attitude, 2) constraint, 3) manipulation, 4) placement, 5) sexual harassment, 6) expectation, and 7) student preparedness. The findings of this study are expected to give insights to all relevant stakeholders, in terms of improvement and strategies

needed in designing an internship program, particularly in the hospitality industry. Besides, it is anticipated to guide internship coordinators and students to well-prepare for the expected difficulties that they might experience while coordinating and undergoing the internship process.

Keywords: internship challenges, hospitality program, public universities, internship coordinator, internship Malaysia

1. Introduction

Universities, students, and industries are the main stakeholders of an internship, and it is shown that internship provides a list of benefits to these parties (Chen, Shen & Gosling, 2018; Renganathan, Karim & Li, 2012). The value, both perceived and real, of internships to students, industries, and universities have contributed to the internship popularity (Coco, 2000; Fei, Waheeb & Sulaiman, 2020). This training period help students to prepare for the workforce by providing an opportunity to understand working conditions, refine and develop new professional skills, and to build networking with co-workers and supervisors (Chen et al., 2018; Dwesini, 2017; Marinakou, 2013). From the employers point of view, a competent workforce will add value to the industry success, and an internship program will help students to improve professional attitudes and competencies (Chen et al., 2018; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013). Well-trained interns contribute to a good talent pool as potential employees, decrease recruitment and selection cost, and act as an ambassador to the company (Lu & Adler, 2009; Maertz, Stoeberl & Marks, 2014). Universities can improve their curriculum by getting feedback from the industry through the internship program, escalating their networks with the industry, and later able to increase the university's reputation and visibility. However, there were challenges in implementing internship experienced not only by students but also by internship coordinators and employers. These issues would eventually disrupt the process of delivering a meaningful internship experience to students, particularly within the service-oriented hospitality industry (Bukaliya, 2012; Dwesini, 2017; Maertz et al., 2014; Marinakou, 2013; Renganathan et al., 2012).

Studies reported that undergraduate students who had unpleasant experiences in the hospitality industry during their internship might become uncertain about proceeding their careers in the same industry once they completed their studies (Fidgeon, 2010; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). In the hospitality industry, interns would have misconceptions about the industry and not interested in the hospitality career paths if there was a mismatch between their internship work experiences and their expectations (Roney & Oztin, 2007; Lu & Adler, 2009). Some students were found to be clueless about the types of work or employment conditions in the hospitality industry due to the factors of high and unrealistic expectations of hospitality employment. This situation can be due to limited exposure to the reality of hospitality working environments during their studies (Baltescu, 2016; Dwesini, 2017; Sibanyoni, Kleynhans & Vibetti, 2015). If this situation persists and worsens in the future, the hospitality industry would experience a shortage of talent pool, high turnover and lack of labour supply from fresh graduates of the hospitality program. In order to avoid these unfavourable circumstances, relevant stakeholders should give attention to the root cause of

this issue, by cultivating positive internship experiences in the hospitality industry.

The most common factors that create dissatisfaction and decreased motivation among hospitality interns were low pay, poor relationship and communication between employee-supervisor, disorganized work system as well as long and hectic working hours (Collins, 2002; Lam & Ching, 2007). These unfavourable working conditions reflect a poor image of the hospitality industry, which demotivates students and affect their performance during the internship period (Marinakou, 2013). Surprisingly, some small firms or family businesses treated interns as cheap labours and did not provide proper training for student's self-development (Taylor, 2004). Besides, students complained that staff and managers were not well-prepared in giving positive experiences during the internship, which resulted in disorganized or inconsistent internship training (Roney & Öztin, 2007). As such, interns would perceive that an internship is not a platform to develop their employment skills and abilities.

Another determining factor of the internship experience is the university. Hospitality interns pointed out that their faculty members, particularly the internship coordinators, were not able to design, evaluate and handle the internship program systematically and the university failed to adequately prepare students to adapt with the challenges and demands of the current workforce in the hospitality industry (Lam & Ching, 2007; Zopiatis, 2007). Faculty members and internship coordinators were responsible for mentoring and supervising interns, as well as seeking reputable and committed organizations that could provide a meaningful internship experience to students. Additionally, the university also has to bear certain liabilities concerning the safety of interns throughout their internships and can be charged if found to be negligent (Maertz et al., 2013). The role of internship coordinators could contribute to the success or failure of an internship program; the inadequate emphasis and planning in implementing internship due to heavy workloads and lack of knowledge about the industry may cause negative impacts to the internship program which would be experienced by students (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; McMahon & Quinn, 1995). The internship coordinators' role is also crucial since they deal with both students and employers in ensuring a successful and smooth internship process. However, many studies discuss challenges perceived by students and employers but little studies that were conducted empirically on the challenges perceived by internship coordinators (Beggs et al., 2008; Marinakou, 2013; Renganathan et al., 2012). Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore the challenges perceived by internship coordinators from Malaysian public universities within the context of the hospitality degree program.

2. Literature Review

An internship is a job training that covers many professional fields and usually taken up by college and university students as a mandatory requirement for their studies. It should be implemented as a structured program and career-relevant work experience to add value and prepare for students' readiness before they enter the industry for employment (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Renganathan et al., 2012). The primary purpose of an internship is to serve as an opportunity for the student to practice the theoretical knowledge learned in the

classroom and implement it within the real working environment (Maertz, Stoeberl & Marks, 2014). An internship is part of evaluative components assessed by higher education institutions. Today, students participate in internships in many different ways. Some internship programs receive allowances, while others are not. The length of an internship program varies depending on the organizations, but it is commonly implemented between three to six months. In Malaysia, an internship is a compulsory requirement for undergraduates' graduation. The internship experience can be enhanced if both industry and higher education institutions have a mutual understanding in finding a way to support effectively, facilitate and supervise students throughout the internship program (Pusiran, Janin, Ismail & Dalinting, 2020).

Despite the benefits that internship may have for all the three stakeholders (i.e. undergraduates, higher education institutions and employers), there were also challenges in planning and implementing the internship program. The most common issues faced by undergraduates were heavy workloads and inadequate compensation. Full-time staff and managers were not adequately trained to contribute and enhance the students' experience during the internship, and some gave little support to realize valuable internship training. Aside from that, it is also argued that education providers were not well prepared to ensure that their students competently cope with the challenges and demands of real works in the industry (Maertz, Stoeberl & Marks, 2014; Marinakou 2013). The circumscription of the internship delivery resulting in the unattainable of internship objectives. Though different organizations would have different nature of fields, type of works or even standard operating procedures, both employers and education providers should give attention to assure that the internship program experienced by students is profound and significant. Some students even expressed their hope for more visits and phone calls from their academics, to both students and supervisors to investigate if things were going in the right direction and assist in unsolved problems (Dwesini, 2017).

Marinakou (2013) indicated that dissatisfaction with inadequate compensation or no compensation at all decrease interns' motivation to give the best effort in performing their job. Some students perceived that an internship program is a conspiracy that utilizes students to work without an acceptable payment rate and at the same time they have to pay their program fee at the university (Schambach & Kephart, 1997). Moreover, interns felt disappointed that they were excluded from the company reward systems and benefits. Interns did not receive tips, recognition, attending company parties, free employee meals, or employee discounts which further the concern of interns' exploitation. This situation might be unfair to interns who come from low financial family, and the internship placement is far from their home (Lee, Chao & Chen, 2015; Roy & Sykes, 2017).

On the other hand, the challenges faced by employers in implementing the internship program are the cost of training and supervising new interns. Typically, employers assign supervisors or staff to train, supervise and evaluate interns during the training. The training incurs an indirect cost to the company as the time spent by the supervisors or staffs can be utilized to do their jobs. In some cases, interns need special attention and continuous supervision due to the lack of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Some employers reported that

interns could not manage their time well, poor problem-solving skills and could not accept criticism. Hence, supervisors and managers find it challenging to design and assign tasks to build up interns' competencies as they believed interns were not skillful and would not be able to perform well on the task given (Maertz et al., 2014; Pusiran et al., 2020; Renganathan et al., 2012).

As the responsibilities to plan and manage internships are borne by academicians, besides performing their core duties such as teaching, research and supervision, internship coordinators might somehow not giving much attention to the implementation of the internship program. An effective internship planning requires genuine interest from the coordinator, adequate resources and support from the faculty, as well as systematic planning and evaluation procedures. Thus, the internship coordinator is viewed as one of the essential stakeholders for the internship program. The selection of an internship coordinator should be made thoroughly as the coordinator must be accountable for before, during, and after the internship program (Kim, Kim & Bzullak, 2012; Zopiatis, 2007). Smith (1999) proposed that one way to enhance internship experience is by appointing an experienced internship coordinator who can engage the student in critical inquiries that emerge throughout the internship program. As some faculties change the internship coordinator from time to time, there are some limitations to improving the internship program if there is a lack of integration between the current and former coordinators. Visits to the internship sites and internship regulations should be revised from time to time by the internship coordinator in order to improve the effectiveness of the internship program (Bukaliya et al., 2012; James, 2018).

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design. The qualitative approach focuses on learning about the issues or problems from the perspectives of respondents, and the analysis of qualitative research is very much interpretative (Creswell, 2015). Respondents were chosen through purposive sampling based on the specific criteria which were: 1) coordinators who are currently in charge of the internship program, and 2) academicians who had experience in handling internship programs. The selection of the respondents was within the context of the hospitality or food service degree program in Malaysian public universities. List of the universities were obtained from the website of the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education and a phone call was made in getting an interview appointment with the coordinator. Then, the semi-structured questions guided from the past literature and experts' recommendations were asked through face-to-face interview with respondents within Selangor state. While for respondents outside Selangor, interviews were conducted through phone call and were recorded using an audio recorder. On average, every session lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. This study obtained approval from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects from Universiti Putra Malaysia, thus ensuring anonymity, volunteerism and confidentiality of respondents. A total of seven internship coordinators were interviewed and data saturation had been reached from these seven respondents. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Throughout data collection and analysis, trustworthiness was demonstrated by implementing member checking, expert review and inter-coder agreement.

3. Results

3.1 Respondents Profile

There were seven different respondents from six different universities. One university in the central region offered two different courses relate to the hospitality and food service field. Each program had its own internship coordinator. All the six universities are located in five different states in Malaysia. All the coordinators were current coordinators of the internship program and they had more than one year of experience in handling the internship. The profile for each respondent is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Respondents Profile

Respondent Code	University Code	Degree Program	University Location
R1	U1	Bachelor of Entrepreneurship (Hospitality) (Hons)	East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia
R2	U2	Bachelor Science Food Service Management	Central Region
R3	U3	Bachelor of Tourism Planning & Hospitality Management (Hons)	Southern Region
R4	U4	Bachelor of Business (Hotel Management) (Hons)	East Malaysia
R5	U5	Bachelor of Science (Hons) Food Service Management	Central Region
R6	U5	Bachelor of Science (Hons) Hotel Management	Central Region
R7	U6	Bachelor of Hospitality Management (Hons)	Northern Region

3.2 Challenges in the Hospitality Internship

Based on the interviews with the internships coordinators from six public universities in Malaysia, the challenges experienced by the coordinators in implementing the hospitality internship were classified into five different themes: 1) attitude, 2) constraint, 3) manipulation, 4) placement, 5) sexual harassment, 6) expectation, and 7) student preparedness. Each of the challenge themes consisted of several codes, which will be explained in the next paragraph. A list of the challenges' themes and codes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. List of the Themes and Codes for the Hospitality Internship Challenges in Malaysian Public Universities

Themes	Codes
1. Attitude	▪ Students' affairs at the workplace ▪ Students were not following rules/instructions ▪ Students were choosy about their internship place ▪ Students did not follow the timeline for the internship application ▪ Company breached the promise ▪ Employees in the company did not follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) ▪ Company did not cooperate in giving feedback according to the deadlines given by the faculty
2. Constraint	▪ Budget constraint

	▪ Time constraint
3. Manipulation	▪ Company misused students for its own benefit
4. Placement	▪ Difficulties to search an internship place ▪ Duration of the internship placement
5. Sexual harassment	▪ Verbal sexual harassment ▪ Physical sexual harassment
6. Expectation	▪ Different expectation between university and industry ▪ Company did not really train student ▪ High expectation from the industry on the students' skill ▪ Mismatch skills needed by the company
7. Student preparedness	▪ Student's lack of interest ▪ Students underestimated the nature of real work environment

3.2.1 Attitude

Susskind, Borchgrevink, Brymer, and Kacmar (2010) indicated that attitude is an important element for service employees, as it reflects the quality of services delivered to guests. This study found that attitude was one of the challenges perceived by the internship coordinators, where attitude problems derived from both students and the industry. There are seven elements that developed the attitude theme: 1) students' affairs at the workplace, 2) students were not following rules/instructions, 3) students were choosy about their internship place, 4) students did not follow the timeline for the internship application, 5) company breached the promise, 6) employees in the company did not follow SOPs, and 7) company did not cooperate in giving feedback according to the deadlines given by the faculty.

Some companies prohibit workplace affair and romance, due to the negative impacts it will bring to the company. Some hospitality students were reported to have a relationship beyond professional needs where they had personal affairs with their colleagues. One of the respondents (R7) indicated that:

"...sometimes students fall in love with their colleague at the workplace. This kind of things will affect the student's internship process", (R7).

The internship coordinator also reported that students did not follow the rules and instructions given by the internship company. Though it was just basic rules, the students were simply ignored and this create a negative image to the university.

"...every semester, we gave advice to students to properly dress..... However, there are students who do not follow this dress up rule. Your hair must be short, and some students could not just follow our advices. So, it is a challenge for us to handle students' attitude", (R6).

Another element of the attitude problem from the industry is the employees who could be the co-worker to interns did not follow the SOPs and this could not be a good example to the interns. The interns shared their experiences with the internship coordinator and asked for advice on what they should do. It was quite difficult for them to report to the top management or practice what they have learned in class as they were only an intern and most of the employees were older than them.

"...company have their SOPs, but there are certain parts they do not follow SOPs..... We

know this when our interns come back and share their experiences. For example, interns share that when they do housekeeping and need to use a vacuum cleaner, the staff only use guest towel to wipe all things. Sometimes the staff only change the bedsheet and did not change the pillowcases. The mug is not properly cleaned and wiped", (R7).

3.2.2 Constraint

Another theme of challenges explored by this study is constraint, in terms of budget and time. It is known that internship implementation requires costs to both universities and industries. The costs may include recruitment cost, training cost, supervision cost, site visit cost and intern remuneration (Bukaliya, 2012; Maertz et al., 2014). A public university that has a number of branches spend a high operational cost to implement an internship. With large number of students, internship evaluation visits can be costly.

"Our university has a few branches across Malaysia. For example, if our student does internship in Miri, we will call the lecturer in Miri branch to do a visit for the student in order to reduce cost. This is quite challenging in terms of financial since our university is big and oversee internship students is costly", (R5).

Respondents also mentioned that time constraints limit the effectiveness in implementing the internship program. It is known that faculty member has numerous tasks to do besides teaching, research and supervising students.

"It is quite challenging in term of time. The difficulty is during the internship application and follow up with the company. So, I started working in 2017. At that time, I did not have any duties associated with teaching. Therefore, I can dedicate my time in managing internship…. When I started to have teaching duties and others, I admit it is quite challenging in terms of time. I become unfocused and overloaded with other works", (R5).

3.2.3 Manipulation

Internship also was found to be a platform of manipulation where companies misused students for their own benefits. Though an internship is valuable for career achievement, some industries undervalued interns (Gault, Redington & Schlager, 2000). This behavior may demotivate interns and at the same time decrease the reputation of the company, though only few employees in the company do it.

"The student needs to carry bag and tidying up rooms. The student has to do all jobs. There was one time student need to handle payment at the cashier system and the staff who is on duty was not there. The staff was missing from after she punched in until end of the work time. The staff did not supervise the intern. During the midnight shift, the student sits at the front office, and the staff on duty goes to sleep." (R6)

3.2.4 Placement

The placement process was among the highlighted issues in coordinating internships. Finding an internship placement was challenging to both interns and coordinators, where previous studies reported that most interns were satisfied with their co-workers and management but

not the training they received during the internship (Barren, 1999; Dahanayake, Biyiri & Dassanayake, 2019). Thus, it is challenging to obtain a placement from reputable companies that provide quality training programs. The results of this study discover two elements that comprise the placement challenge: 1) difficulties to search an internship place, and 2) duration of the internship placement. Due to the economic crisis experienced by our country, most companies could not offer internship placement. Moreover, the internship duration of some program is only three to four months, which is not acceptable by the industry.

"Nowadays it is difficult to search for internship place. Due to the situation of the economy, the company even terminate their employees to cut cost", (R5).

"Our internship duration is only three months. So certain company do not want to take any of our students for internship. For me, three months is really short duration but it is already stated in the faculty policy", (R4).

3.2.5 Sexual Harassment

Hersch (2015) refers sexual harassment to the unwelcome and unreasonable sex related conduct. Research has shown that sexual harassment has adverse effects of employees' stress, depression and family undermining (Zhu, Lyu & Ye, 2019). There were two types of sexual harassment found in this study: 1) verbal, and 2) physical harassment. The sexual harassment was done by either the manager or the customer in the organization. It is important for the internship coordinator to monitor the harassment case as the university can be found negligent in the case for not realizing the danger of the sexual harassment.

"So far, there is no serious case involving sexual harassment. We received three to four cases of verbal sexual harassment done by the manager of the hotel", (R6)

"There was one case where a male student was sexually assaulted by a guest. It happened during the room service. The student was setting up the console table and get hugged from behind by the male guest. The student pushed the guest away and reported the incident to the Department Human Resource of the hotel", (R6).

3.2.6 Expectation

Another challenge perceived by the internship coordinators was the expectation, comprising these elements: 1) different expectation between university and industry, 2) company did not really train student, 3) high expectation from the industry on the students' skill, and 4) mismatch skills needed by the company. There was a mismatch for expectation between the university and the industry:

"University and company have a different expectation regarding the internship. Our expectation is the company train our student so that students can learn a lot while company only use the student as a tool to be fully utilized. The company has its own desire which mismatch with the university goals", (R3).

One of the respondents mentioned that there was a skill mismatch once the students started their internship program at the company, where this issue should be addressed during the

internship application:

"We had a situation where the intern needs to do work that were not related to the degree program. There was no objection during the application, so when the intern started doing the internship in that company, the company just realized that the degree program did not match with what the company want", (R1).

3.2.7 Student Preparedness

Student's lack of interest and students underestimated the nature of the real work environment are the elements of the challenge for student preparedness. The internship coordinators shared that some students did not have passion to continue with the career in the hospitality industry due to the heavy workload and they did not prepare for the real work environment in this industry:

"Sometimes when the student finishes their internship practical, the student felt that they are not interested in pursuing a career in the hospitality industry…. work at a hotel is tiring and exhausting, so students have no passion to continue working in the hospitality industry", (R4).

"When we talk about tourism and hospitality, the student seems shocked with nature of the real work. Students do not expect that work in the tourism and hospitality industry would be heavy. This happens due to the student are too comfortable with the university campus life. This problem happens among certain students especially when they go for an internship program in a hotel", (R3)

4. Discussion

This study proposed six main challenges perceived by the internship coordinators from the hospitality undergraduate programs in Malaysian public universities: 1) attitude, 2) constraint, 3) manipulation, 4) placement, 5) sexual harassment, 6) expectation, and 7) student preparedness. Most of the findings are in line with the previous studies, for example the challenges of attitude, budget and time constraint, and expectation (Beggs, 2008; James, 2018; Maertz et al., 2014; McMahon & Quinn, 1995; Zopiatis, 2007). Nonetheless, the challenges that emerged from this study comprises the elements that are more specific within the context of the hospitality program and industry in Malaysia. Besides extending the current literature, it is anticipated that the findings of this study would contribute to all the stakeholders relevant to the hospitality internship program: university, industry and student. Faculty and internship coordinator will be able to plan for strategies to overcome the expected challenges and give extra attention to certain aspects when planning for an internship program. The industry and students may also have an insight on how to improve cooperation and understanding in order to realize the success of an internship program. This study has some limitations where the respondents derived from only one stakeholder, the internship coordinator. By having triangulation from different stakeholders such as industry, student and head of the department, a more in-depth and balance findings can be obtained. Thus, it is recommended for future research to include all the stakeholders as the respondents to investigate the challenges and perhaps recommended strategies on the hospitality internship program.

Acknowledgments

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