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Critical perspectives

Linking internships and classroom learning: A case study examination of hospitality and tourism management students



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study focuses on Hospitality and Tourism Management internships to examine whether these cooperative education experiences complement student learning and furthermore, enhance knowledge previously gained through a traditional classroom setting. It specifically focuses on preparation for the internship experience, identifies signs of links to prior classroom learning, explores if the internship allowed the student to develop new skills and finally seeks connections between academic theories and their practical application in the workplace. A mixed methodology is used which initially analyses quantitative data from 339 questionnaire respondents before examining qualitative outcomes via a series of focus groups with consenting students. Whilst set in the context of a Case University, the study suggests that students feel that the education they received prior to their internship had prepared them for their experiences. In addition, statistical significance showed that theories discussed in the classroom are important to their learning and that examples of these theoretical approaches were evident during their practical experiences. Finally, as a result of their internships, students felt that their classroom education underpinned the additional learning of new skills and competencies that occurred during their internships. The findings provide a sound first step in the examination of the teaching effectiveness at the Case University and offer opportunities for further research in a broader context.

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1. Introduction

This study builds on previous research by names withheld to assist the anonymity of authors on internship design with Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) students. The earlier studies explored the role internships played in impacting a student's satisfaction/intrinsic motivational levels through an examination of work characteristics present in their experiential education experiences.

While undertaking these previous studies, the authors' unearthed a number of indicators that demonstrated that a student's educational development isn't simply a product of time spent in the classroom. It evolves from the interplay between lessons learnt in a classroom setting coupled with those encountered as part of an applied, experiential education process. Historically supported in the literature from educational theorists including Dewey (1938); Freire (1993); Kolb

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(1984); Mezirow (1997); Rogers (1995), this combined approach to learning has a proven record of shaping both the academic and practical development of students in the learning process. These scholars advocate for experiential education as a complement (or in some cases as an alternative) to other instructive methods and their research has shaped the development of a number of 'high impact' learning experiences that are present in many higher education disciplines today (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005).

In the United States, where this study was undertaken, Indiana University annually publishes the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2016). This is the product of a research team who reach out to all accredited, Bachelor's degree awarding higher education institutions to survey students on their experiences within an undergraduate educational setting. The results are compiled in an annual report that highlights much of what students seek in their professional development and learning at university (http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/annual_results.cfm).

As a vehicle for student engagement, experiential educational is a key component of the NSSE benchmarks on enriching educational experiences. The findings outlined in their reports support the observations made by the aforementioned theorists (Dewey, Freire, Kolb, Lewin, Mezirow and Rogers) and delve specifically into the practice of experiential learning as a teaching and learning tool advocating its role and contribution in both the workplace and an educational setting. Since the first NSSE publication on student engagement, education administrators and teaching staff have taken greater notice of the report's annual findings and are frequently re-visiting their teaching and learning strategies accordingly to facilitate more high impact learning experiences for their students (Kuh, 2008).

High impact learning practices encourage students to be more engaged with their education via facilitated experiences that develop their characteristics as a learner. These may include, but aren't limited to, the development of their problem solving and research skills, collaborative work assignments with peers, reflective learning practices, and the application of theory to real-world situations. Common examples offered by universities include: first year seminars, community based learning opportunities, study abroad experiences, capstone classes, undergraduate research projects and internships (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>) (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2016).

For the purpose of this research, the area of work based internships was selected as a vehicle for students to apply the academic theories learnt in the classroom to practice of industry. While research into internships within a hospitality and tourism management context are plentiful in recent times (Lohman, Austin, Borgen, & Salo Wolff, 2015; Robinson, Ruhanen, & Breakey, 2016; Ruhanen, Robinson, & Breakey, 2013a; Stansbie, Nash, & Jack, 2013; Stansbie & Nash, 2016; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013), these have typically focused on student/faculty outcomes from the internship experience itself.

However, while there are many ways to examine this important pedagogical approach to student learning, one perspective, that has seen little attention by researchers, is to explore the relationship between the theory delivered within a classroom context, and the experiential component obtained from internships. The focus here is to gain an understanding as to how these two approaches collectively impact a student's academic knowledge/development. As a result, the purpose of this paper will be to examine the role experiential education (in the form of internships) plays in enhancing or confirming previous, academic knowledge gained, by the student from their classroom education.

While positioned as an exploratory, first stage approach to understanding these relationships at a Case University, the perceived benefits of this study should allow for more informed decision making on curriculum design and delivery for academic leaders. In addition, it is anticipated that students will benefit from enhanced connectivity between their classroom topics and their application to the vocational nature of the industry which, hopefully, will result in greater levels of motivation toward their studies, improved grades and less attrition from their programs of study. Furthermore, this paper will offer a sound foundation allowing opportunities for further research into the impact of these high impact learning experiences on student's grade performance, retention and intrinsic motivation.

2. Literature review

Several authors suggest that a successfully facilitated internship can result in many benefits relating to the application of theory to practice (Busby, 2005; Collins, 2002; Lee & Chou, 2012; Van Hoof, 2000; Stansbie & Nash, 2016; Walo, 2001; Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013). Others propose that this has even greater utility in terms of their academic performance (Blair & Millea, 2004; Hauck, Allen, & Rondinelli, 2000; Little & Harvey, 2006; Mandilaras, 2004). The theories and concepts associated with learning through experience date back many years, with the first formal cooperative education program launched at the University of Cincinnati, USA at the turn of the twentieth century (Kraft & Sakofs, 1986). According to Brewer (1990), this may have been influenced by the development of sandwich programs in UK universities during the 1840's and while they appear to have made a recent resurgence in mainstream education (Kuh, 2008), according to Sovilla and Varty (2004), there is still much work to do.

Previous studies into the internship process address a number of topics including the following:

- Stakeholder benefits (Busby, 2005; Coco, 2000; Lam & Ching, 2007; Leslie & Richardson, 2000; Walo, 2001; Walmsley, Thomas & Jameson, 2012; Zopiatis, 2007).
- Overseas experiences by UK and international students (Busby, 2005; Busby & Gibson, 2010; Gibson & Busby, 2009; Ruhanen, Robinson, & Breakey, 2013b).
- Career intentions/preparation (Busby, 2003; Chen & Shen, 2012; Hurst, Thyne, & Wise, 2014; Lee & Chao, 2012; Robinson

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