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## Academic Papers

# A tourism immersion internship: Student expectations, experiences and satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

The number of internship models that can potentially be applied to a field of study such as tourism is as broad and diverse. Conceptually, this study draws attention to an 'alternative' less structured, multi-stakeholder, knowledge-exchange model, which augments traditional internship approaches. Further, few studies have investigated students' expectations, experiences and satisfaction with these alternative models. This paper reports on a qualitative study of undergraduate students who had participated in a unique tourism internship program focused around a destination immersion experience. The findings demonstrate opportunities to provide meaningful work integrated learning experiences that are different from more traditional internships.

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## 1. Introduction

There are a range of models and approaches to the design of internships but generally students are placed with a host organization, often for a substantial period of time (Yiu & Law, 2012). Internships as a work integrated learning model have grown in popularity and are now widely used in a variety of disciplines and feature in many degree programs. Such models are prevalent within business, tourism and hospitality tertiary study programs (Van Hoof, 2000) and as Yiu and Law found in their review of the hospitality and tourism literature, "recently, there has been a large increase in the popularity and perceived significance of internship programs" (2012, p.378). Internships, or supervised work experience, can value-add to, and contextualize, students' theoretical knowledge by applying and trying concepts in practice (Busby, 2003; Cho, 2006; Ju, Emenheiser, Clayton, & Reynolds, 1998; Lam & Ching, 2007; Walo, 2001; Waryszak, 1999). It is important for academics and program managers to understand student perspectives of internships as these opportunities are now recognized as an 'essential collegiate experience', as opposed to just an optional enhancement to academic requirements (Collins, 2002).

A focus in the literature has been on the more 'traditional' tourism and hospitality internship programs. Few studies have presented or critically examined other forms of internships, for example the location-based learning courses that incorporate tourism destination-based assessment and guided familiarization visits to regions (Croy, 2009). Researchers still urge further research to evaluate stakeholders' perspectives of various internship models (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Cho, 2006; Lam & Ching, 2007; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). In particular, even fewer studies have investigated students' expectations, experiences and satisfaction (see Yiu & Law, 2012), particularly in respect to these 'alternative' internship models (Ruhanen, Breakey & Robinson, 2012).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative study of undergraduate tourism, hospitality and event students who had participated in the Tourism Regional Immersion Program (TRIP). The program is unusual in that it is

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destination focused, rather than job/organization focused. The TRIP model is an internship, work integrated learning experience where students are immersed (living, working, socialising, etc.) in a destination for a period of up to 10 days. To achieve the research purpose in-depth interviews were conducted with the students and the data were subject to analysis using a qualitative software program. This generated a concept map of the emergent themes that allowed exploration around the broader topics of students' expectations, experiences and satisfaction with the TRIP program. The paper introduces relevant literature and the TRIP program before presenting the research methods which underpinned the study. The research findings and discussion are provided before conclusions and implications are outlined.

## 2. Literature review

Internship is one of the most prevalent terms used to illustrate the student focused collaborative arrangement that takes place between education institutions and organizations in the 'outside' world. Primarily designed to provide and/or enhance the professional education experience of students, essentially an internship is an experiential learning model where students have an opportunity to apply learned theories in real world and/or practical situations; thereby allowing opportunities for students to integrate and consolidate thinking and action by integrating classroom learning with real world experiences (Lam & Ching, 2007; Chang & Chu, 2009). Often internships are associated with an extended period of practical work placement; anything from several weeks to a year or more, taken in one or multiple placements. There are of course other models of work experience or work integrated learning which students might take part in, such as field visits, study tours, industry projects, live case studies, sandwich placements, mentoring, client-based learning models and so on (see Yiu & Law, 2012). However, for the remainder of this paper the term internship has been used to broadly refer to the many forms of practical work-related learning experiences.

There is a large and diverse body of internship related literature in the education field generally as well as discipline or field specific studies such as those in tourism and hospitality (see Airey & Tribe, 2005; Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). The focus of this paper is on the student perspective, addressing the three topics: student expectations, experiences and satisfaction with the TRIP program. The literature most relevant to these topics is on the benefits and challenges associated with such internship programs.

Students are generally considered to be the main beneficiary of internships, although there are of course numerous benefits to academic institutions, educators and employee hosts. Much of the literature has focused on the positive benefits students derive from applying classroom based knowledge, theory and concepts to real world settings (Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009; Boger & Lim, 2005; Busby, 2003; Chang & Chu, 2009; Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Clarke, 2003; Gunlu & Usta, 2009; Harris & Zhao, 2004; Mello, 2006; Mistilis & Harris, 2009; Robinson, Barron, & Solnet, 2008; Stitts, 2006; Walo, 2001; Zopiatis, 2007). Further, internships provide an opportunity for students to gain hands-on, practical experience, as well as develop and acquire skills and knowledge that cannot be obtained within a normal classroom environment (Alpert et al., 2009; Boger & Lim, 2005; Busby, 2003; Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Clark, 2003; Collins, 2002; Mello, 2006; Van Hoof, 2000; Van 't Klooster, van Wijk, Go & van Rekom, 2008; Walo, 2001). In fact Busby (2003, p. 322–323) claims that it is the internship that provides the "procedural knowledge that Tribe (1997, p. 639) identifies as a hallmark of the professional practice of tourism management". This concurs with studies that have claimed internships provide a means to develop or enhance personal attributes and abilities such as: communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, critical thinking, networking, leadership and customer relationship skills (Boger & Lim, 2005; Busby, 2003; Cho, 2006; Clark, 2003; Collins, 2002; Lam & Ching, 2007; Mistilis & Harris, 2009; Scott, 2007; Stitts, 2006; Walmsley, Thomas & Jameson, 2006; Zopiatis, 2007; Zopiatis & Constantine, 2007).

Another benefit to students is the practical experience that they gain through internships. This can improve their capacity to enter employment 'industry ready' (Breakey, Robinson, & Beesley, 2008). Indeed numerous studies have noted the enhanced employment prospects (Alpert et al., 2009; Busby, 2003; Chang & Chu, 2009; Clark, 2003; Kay & DeVeau, 2003; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002; Rehling, 2000; Robinson et al. 2008; Sapp & Zhang, 2009; Stitts, 2006; Stratta, 2004; Zopiatis, 2007). As Stitts (2006, p. 446) noted the students have already been exposed and are somewhat 'adjusted' to "the psychology of workplace cultures". It is for these reasons that internships have been found to offer graduates a competitive edge (Alpert et al., 2009; Somerick, 1993; Boger & Lim, 2005). In fact, Mello (2006) argues that internships are the single most effective strategy for gaining permanent employment.

Although the benefits of internships for students are reasonably well documented, there are challenges that can limit their success. For instance, the management of internships is unquestionably challenging. Organizing, planning, and implementing an experience that is developed with an academic purpose but is designed for non-academic implementation is complex (Kay & DeVeau, 2003; Zopiatis, 2007). For instance, a study by Collins (2002) found that 58% of students complained that they were not given enough training prior to commencing their program. The monitoring associated is logistically challenging; resourcing visits to, and contact with, the intern in situ, as well as the intern's employer or supervisor. Further, hosts often struggle to design sustained projects and tasks that are suitable to the intern and the learning objectives of the experience (Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). Others have found that internship programs fail due to a lack of clarity and understanding (or even ignorance) regarding each party's (employer, educational institution and the student) roles and responsibilities (Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Zopiatis, 2007). Specifically, from the student perspective, access to managerial staff has been noted in the literature (Yiu & Law, 2012), and this is one aspect of the internship that the design of TRIP set out to address.

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