

A Content and Thematic Analysis of Student International Internship Reports: Basis for Designing Alternative Experiential Learning Activities

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ABSTRACT

Schools design internship programs based on intended learning outcomes, which influence their choice of partner training establishments and setting of training activities and duration. An internship is a form of experiential learning, students acquire many unintended discoveries in completing their tasks and interacting with others. This study examines such intended and incidental learning experiences through content and thematic analysis of the internship reports of 26 students of a higher education institution (HEI) located in Cavite, Philippines, who joined either the Thailand Student Internship Abroad Program (SIAP) or the USA Work and Travel Program in 2018 and 2019. These reports contained student reflections, weekly logs of their training activities, and supervisor feedback. The following nodes or units of analysis were used: type of establishment, training area, intentional learning, incidental learning, courses and activities in school that prepared them for their internship, and the supervisors' comments on the students' performance. The findings highlight the importance of developing students' skills in guest handling, food preparation and styling, guiding and escorting, report preparation, and event coordination in preparation for internship. Further, increased cultural knowledge and sensitivity was needed.

These findings were used to improve the HEI internship and skills enhancement program for school year 2021-2022, tempered by current situations, most notably the SIAP suspension and limited implementation of onsite local practicum. Alternative experiential learning activities were thus proposed.

Keywords — International internship, experiential learning, content analysis, thematic analysis, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The study locale is a higher education institution (HEI) in the CALABARZON region which considers international internships among the chief activities that draw students to the hospitality and tourism management programs. In 2018, around 18% of the fourth-year students availed these international experiences for their practicum.

An immediate drop in enrollment in the hospitality and tourism management programs was seen in the school year that followed the declaration by the World Health Organization, in March 2020, of a COVID-19 pandemic (Ducharme, 2020). As of this writing, face-to-face classes have been allowed in Alert Level 1 status (Magsambol, 2022). However, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has yet to lift the ban on the student internship abroad program (SIAP) in July 2020.

Travel restrictions have started easing as early as the last quarter of 2021 (Rodriguez, 2020), with global vaccination rates steadily increasing (Reuters, 2022). However, the prospects of educational delivery going fully back to normal remain uncertain, and a blended learning setup might continue in schools (Razavi, 2020).

As for practicum or internship, not all tourism and hospitality establishments have returned to full-capacity operations (Hilotin, 2021), and thus their capacity to accept students as trainees remain limited. Another challenge hounding school is the increase in the required minimum number of hours of practicum laboratory, from 350 to 600, effective with the curricular structure adopted since 2018 (CMO 62 series of 2017). Further, following this new curriculum, many schools are expected to offer practicum in school year 2021-2022, hence the immediacy of the need to finalize the details of an effective practicum design.

In hospitality and tourism management programs, experiential learning plays a huge role in acclimatizing students to the challenges of working in the

industry, which include diverse customers, high service standard expectations, and inseparability of service production and consumption (Bilsland et al. 2020).

Reflection is an essential aspect of experiential learning, allowing the individual to create meaning (Hayden & Osborn, 2019). The learner interacts with and adapts to the environment, resolves conflicts in adapting, and relearns to create knowledge (Hayden & Osborn, 2019). The present study captures these learnings by examining the reflections contained in the students' internship reports.

Internships and practicum are a form of placement-based work-integrated learning (WIL) (Milne & Caldicott, 2016). Practicum allows students to "experience industry standards" (CMO 62 s2017), as employers are deemed to be ideal assessors of professional competence (Milne & Caldicott, 2016).

Internship benefits different stakeholders. Students who undergo internships receive not only academic credit and remuneration (Lei & Yin, 2019) but also higher starting salaries as well as better employment and career advancement opportunities (Dommeyer et al., 2016; Sanahuja Vélez & Ribes Giner, 2015; Wiseman & Page, as cited in Bilsland et al., 2020). Employers benefit from the inexpensive labor that internship provides, whereas educational institutions boost their reputation: academic-industry partnerships help attract enrollees (Sanahuja Vélez, & Ribes Giner, 2015).

Pinto and Pereira (2019) found that international internship experience did not improve ones' perceived job suitability or starting salary, but the lack of internship experience per se made women applicants less likely to be hired. However, such findings are not generalizable; the authors used fictitious resumes in asking Portuguese businesses to screen applicants for entry-level marketing positions.

One apparent benefit of international exposure is increased cultural awareness (Batey & Lupi, 2012). International internships may provide the needed setting to acclimatize students to workplaces that have become increasingly global-oriented. The concept of international education can be traced to the Grand Tours for aristocrats in Europe in the 18th century (Younes & Asay, 2003). These tours provided both intentional (formal, structured, and purposely planned) and incidental (e.g., interacting with others, completing tasks, experimenting in a trial-and-error setup) learning (Younes & Asay, 2003). Students engaged in self-discovery as they were immersed in other cultures, and they experienced self-efficacy as they learned to adapt to a foreign country. Further, they developed emotional resilience, flexibility and openness, perceptual acuity, and personal

autonomy, as seen in the study by Batey and Lupi (2012) on American students who interned in the United Kingdom.

Students at a Midwestern university in the United States of America registered higher cultural intelligence scores after completing their internship in the Netherlands, Peru, and South Korea (Lambert Snodgrass et al., 2021). Their international internship program included living in local neighborhoods, completing academic courses, and working at a local business, following a Live-Learn-Work model.

One's communication skills likewise improve when in a foreign country. Chinese students who joined a short-term Walt Disney internship program reported increased comprehension and confidence in speaking English (Jing & Zhang, 2019).

In light of the stricter protocols that the CHED has prescribed for holding classes and providing WIL for students, the question becomes, "how will hospitality and tourism internships be delivered?" Moreover, "what alternative experiences can HEIs design to ensure that important learning outcomes are achieved?"

As early as 2017, Sykes and Roy (2017) have proposed a framework for internships in hospitality programs delivered through distance learning. Their framework sees internship as ground based or close to the learner's location but supervised by the educational institution, albeit from a distance. For virtually supervised internships to succeed, Sykes and Roy (2017) suggest preparing a letter of commitment that outlines the program learning objectives to which both the host establishment and educational institution agree; clarifying the roles of the student, internship coordinator, and host establishment; evaluating the students' performance based on set criteria; conducting a pre-internship seminar; requiring the student to keep a virtual log of and reflection on the internship activities, in addition to completing self-assessment; maintaining an instructor-moderated discussion board that may include role-playing activities; and hosting on-site training.

Programs such as the SIAP and the USA Work-and-Study program operate with the same principle as the internships offered through distance education in Sykes and Roy's study: the students' practicum adviser, based in the HEI, maintains communication with the students through a virtual platform. Coordinating agencies that offer these programs usually provide an ocular visit of host establishments to school administrators who intend to avail the program. However, because these visits are scheduled before deploying students to the host

establishments, they are rarely used to check student performance during the internship.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is a content and thematic analysis of students' international internship reports that addressed the following objectives: (1) to classify the students according to type of establishment and training area, (2) to describe the intentional and incidental learnings that surfaced from their narratives, (3) to determine which prior courses or school activities they considered helpful in preparing them for international internship, (4) to reveal areas for improvement in instructional delivery based on supervisors' comments on the students' performance, and (5) to recommend alternative experiential learning experiences that the HEI can integrate in its practicum program for the school year 2021-2022 in light of current conditions.

METHODOLOGY

The main source of data were 26 internship reports containing student reflections, weekly logs, and supervisor evaluations about students' participation in either the Thailand SIAP or USA Work and Travel Program from 2018 to 2019. Of these 26 reports, 23 were about the SIAP and the rest were about the USA Work-and-Travel program. Other international internship reports were excluded as they lacked sufficient narrative or qualitative supervisor feedback.

Internship reports allow a methodical reflection on the trainees' experiences, from practicum establishment selection to completing the pre-internship requirements, the actual internship, and then evaluation (Santos et al., 2019). Content analysis allows the researcher to select units of analysis, whereas thematic analysis allows extracting meaning from text (Vaismordi et al., 2013). Further, content analysis entails "identifying units of analyses, paraphrasing relevant excerpts, reducing data, categorizing the remaining data, and reviewing the categories against the original data" (Flick, as cited in Cohen et al., 2011).

In the pre-coding stage, the researcher skimmed through the reports to identify possible units of analysis (or "nodes"). These units of analysis became the basis for classifying the narratives as follows:

- Type of establishment
- Training area
- Intentional learning
- Incidental learning
- Courses and activities in school that prepared them for their internship
- Supervisors' comments on students' performance

After extracting relevant excerpts from the narratives and paraphrasing where needed, the researcher ordered the excerpts according to the above units of analysis. These excerpts were read at least thrice, and the researcher assigned codes based on meaning derived from the data. Similar codes were then grouped, and the resulting themes were identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What types of establishments and training areas the students joined in their international internship?

The SIAP and USA Work-and-Travel host establishments where the students interned were generally airport lounges (42%), resorts (42%), and hotels (15%). One student was initially assigned to a resort, then to an airport lounge, and a student interned in a theme park in the USA.

In terms of training batch, 14 (54%) of the students included in this study completed training in March 2019, and the rest (12, 46%) in March or summer of 2018. In terms of training department or area, eight students were assigned to more than one area. Table 1 shows the different areas that the students joined.

Table 1. Training Areas

Baking	1	(1 BSHRM)
Food and Beverage Services	6	(3 BSHRM, 3 BST)
Front Office	4	(All BST)
Guest Services	11	(3 BSHRM, 8 BST)
Housekeeping	4	(All BSHRM)
Kitchen	7	(6 BS HRM, 1 BST)
Ride Operations	1	(BST)
Spa	1	(BSHRM)
Travel and Tours Desk	1	(BST)

Research Question 2: What were the intentional and incidental learnings that surfaced from the narratives of students of a particular HEI on joining the SIAP and USA Work-and-Travel program in 2018 and 2019?

As shown in Table 2, all the students reported that they answered guest or passenger inquiries except for one trainee assigned to do housekeeping work in a hotel for the USA Work and Travel program. According to supervisor feedback, the latter student needed to overcome shyness in initiating conversations with hotel guests. This finding implies the importance of training students in product knowledge to improve their confidence in talking with guests.

Table 2. Intentional Learning

Provided product information	25	96%
Handled food (i.e., food and beverage preparation and service)	18	69%
Escorted guests (around the hotel, to immigration express lane)	14	54%
Prepared daily reports (e.g., inventory of stocks, guest arrivals/lounge users, tour bookings, laundry report, etc.)	13	50%
Performed work that required physical strength (i.e., pushing food carts, carrying luggage, clearing tables, cleaning guest rooms and public areas)	13	50%
Work required special techniques or creativity (i.e., floral arrangement, napkin folding, baking, cooking, fruit/vegetable carving)	10	38%
Contacted other hotels, airlines, immigration	9	35%
Handled guest complaints	9	35%
Learned to use Property Management System to update guest information, check-in/out guests	5	19%
Booked airport transfers and tours	2	8%

That 69% of the students were assigned to handle food and beverages implies the importance of orienting them on food safety and sanitation principles. Another skill that schools should develop is guiding—which requires confidence and a keen sense of direction—because more than half (54%) of the students performed tasks that required escorting guests around the establishment.

Report preparation was also fairly common in their internship, as reported by 50% of the students. Although establishments may provide a template for preparing these reports, students who are adequately trained in MS Office and other applications, including property management and global distribution systems, tend to display increased self-efficacy in completing the task.

The internship can be exhausting for students, especially when the tasks require physical strength, such as cleaning guest rooms and public areas, clearing tables, carrying luggage, or pushing heavy equipment. Half of the students in this study performed some form of work that required physical exertion.

Also worth noting are the tasks that require dexterity and a certain degree of creativity, such as creating flower bouquets, folding linen, producing pastries, and carving fruits or vegetables, as reported by 38% of the students included in this study.

Coordinating with various offices and addressing guest complaints were both cited in the internship reports of 35% of the students. In properties managed by well-known brands such as Wyndham, Ramada, Embassy Suites, Hilton, and Kings Dominion, none of the students reported dealing with guest complaints. Complaints mostly arose from the lack of personnel who would immediately assist guests or passengers, limited food options and other amenities at the VIP lounge, crowded tours, and tour cancellations due to inclement weather—aspects which are sometimes beyond the students' control. One student did not use the word complaint in her narrative but instead described the passengers of a certain nationality to be rude or mean. Understanding cultural differences and conflict resolution could help students deal with such guests in difficult situations.

Table 3. Incidental Learning

Adjusted to a different culture and language (by using Google Translate, teaching oneself to learn some foreign words, speaking slowly, using sign language, adjusting to spicy food)	23	88%
Kept a calm, professional, and friendly demeanor at all times; exercise patience	15	58%
Grew independent and responsible	9	35%
Worked long hours, especially during peak season, because the industry requires it	8	31%
Overcame shyness in dealing with guests; experienced increased confidence	8	31%
Managed their time	7	27%
Built harmonious relationships with peers, co-workers, and superiors; was treated as part of a family	7	27%
Handled difficult living conditions	6	23%
Appreciated/enjoyed the rich culture in the places they visited	4	15%
Maintained good grooming and dressed professionally	3	12%

Trained other trainees	2	8%
Dealt with homesickness	1	4%
Lamented not being assigned to other departments	1	4%

Not surprisingly, completing an international internship requires adjusting to the culture of that country and to the different nationalities they encountered on the job. A total of 88% of the students in this study recounted how they adapted to an initially unfamiliar environment. Several students used applications such as Google Translate or spoke slowly and with sign language—indicative of what Batey and Lupi (2012) termed as perceptual acuity or increased attentiveness to other people’s verbal and nonverbal cues.

As for schools, the pre-departure orientation needs to be more intentionally designed, to include understanding nuances in language, navigating unfamiliar places, or simply, being street smart.

Whether local or international, internship entails working with people of varied temperaments. Courtesy and patience were reported by 58% of the students as important skills on the job. One student narrated that an immigration officer would often speak as though he was shouting, but this student eventually just learned to carry on with her job, unfazed by his attitude.

Nine students (35%) emphasized the value of independence in completing an international internship. One student recounted that it was her “first time to ride in an airplane” she learned “to approach airline personnel confidently, open a bank account, and obtain a social security number in the USA.” To quote another student, “I learned to be thrifty in handling my money,” whereas another said, “I learned to make my own decisions.” Eight students (31%), all assigned to the airport lounge, complained about rendering too much overtime work. On some occasions, they had to forego their breaks because of the volume of passengers they needed to assist.

One student assigned to the front office initially wanted to record guest information but eventually enjoyed talking to guests of different nationalities. She is one of eight students in this study (31%) whose confidence in interacting with people grew over three months of internship.

Other learnings focused on the importance of managing one’s time (27%), building harmonious work relationships (27%), and handling difficult living conditions (23%). These realizations prepare one for adulthood and can be seen as offshoots of living independently. One US intern would sometimes walk long distances from her apartment to her workplace or the mall as no buses were

available. Another student complained about the inconvenience of taking a 10- to 15-minute boat ride daily, under the scorching heat of the sun, to reach the resort. Others dealt with faulty air conditioning at their dormitory. These findings imply the need to brief students about housing conditions and commuting to work to set their expectations properly. Yet scholars (Batey & Lupi, 2012) view these discomforts as a turning point in one's journey of self-discovery, thus labeling study-abroad internships as 'transformational learning opportunities.' Students learn about complex socio-economic issues and, in the process, gain increased self-confidence.

By contrast, 15% of the students in the study reported immensely enjoying the rich culture (e.g., holiday traditions, dances) of the country where they interned. Two trainees were asked to host the holiday festivities at the resort where they worked.

On one hand, the relatively short duration—two months—of these international internships may have reduced the usual misgivings in being away from home (Penington & Wildermuth, as cited in Batey and Lupi, 2012). Working alongside peers (i.e., the case of the students who joined the SIAP Thailand program as a large delegation) and having relatives whom one can visit if needed (i.e., the case of students who joined the USA work-and-travel program) helped them in coping with isolation. On the other hand, short-term internships could also mean that exposure is confined to "surface" rather than "deep" cultural norms of the host country (Batey & Lupi, 2012). Recommended duration for study abroad programs is one year (Gates, 2014) to achieve full immersion in the language and culture of the host country.

Certain realizations were confined only to a few of the students, but they need to be addressed, nonetheless. One student—an active leader in school and presented herself well—lamented not being assigned to other departments as she remained in housekeeping for the duration of the internship, handling laundry and maintenance of public areas and guestrooms. Intentionality of program design (Lambert Snodgrass et al., 2021; Pagano & Roselle, 2009) is thus important to ensure that students receive the full breadth of the internship experience.

Research Question 3: What were the prior courses or school activities that helped students in their internship?

Not all the students who participated in the study answered this question (part of the self-evaluation for SIAP participants) or discussed it in their internship

report. The pre-practicum seminar and career orientation (19%) were deemed most helpful among those who did. Some students cited particular courses such as destination marketing, tour guiding, culinary, and the skills certification training completed.

Research Question 4: What were the supervisors’ comments on the students’ performance in the host establishments?

The supervisors in US work establishments generally provided lengthy assessments of the students. One supervisor who handled several SIAP trainees provided identical comments for them. The themes that surfaced from the supervisors’ qualitative evaluation of the students’ performance are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Supervisors’ comments

Positive, enthusiastic, proactive, fantastic attitude	13	50%
Recommended for hiring	11	42%
Team player	11	42%
Hardworking	7	27%
Friendly	6	23%
Helpful	6	23%
Willing to learn	6	23%
Talented, skilled	5	19%
Responsible	5	19%
Learned fast, adjusted well	5	19%
Followed policies	4	15%
Punctual	4	15%
Confident	3	12%
Knowledgeable about tasks	3	12%
Good rapport with co-workers	3	12%
Always smiling	3	12%
Polite, professional	2	8%
Well-groomed	2	8%
Good English communication skills	2	8%
Should be creative	2	8%

Needs to learn more about tour operations	1	4%
Understanding towards others	1	4%
Honest	1	4%
Should be careful (in completing tasks)	1	4%
Efficient	1	4%
Exceeded work standards	1	4%
Paid attention to detail	1	4%
Self-motivated	1	4%
Needs to use supplies moderately	1	4%
Humble	1	4%
Should be more confident	1	4%

Supervisor feedback was mostly positive. Among the common traits that the supervisors noticed were having a positive attitude at work (50%), being a team player (42%), being hard-working (27%), as well as being helpful, friendly, and willing to learn—each at 19%, as shown in Table 5. Further, more than half of the raters indicated a willingness to hire the students, although some added that they would hire only if the trainee displayed more creativity or that they would let the student complete additional skills training first, which implies that they considered attitude more important than skills when hiring.

CONCLUSIONS

This section addresses Research Question 5 or the alternative experiences that HEIs can integrate into the practicum program for schoolyear 2021-2022 to produce learnings similar to those identified in the content and thematic analyses and in light of current conditions.

In this study, students tended to adjust better to the work tasks to which they have been exposed previously due to classroom learning or other experiences provided by the school.

Although some students could learn quickly, they struggled—when placed in training areas outside their program specialization, i.e., a tourism student assigned to food and beverage services, a hotel and restaurant management student asked to assist airport passengers. Therefore, one recommendation is to customize internship plans according to the trainee's competencies and interests while meeting intended learning outcomes.

The lack of confidence that the students experienced in starting their internships could imply a need for the HEI to design learning experiences that simulate work situations such as in handling irate guests, navigating a property management system, or touring guests around a property. Skill certifications improve students' preparedness for internship and thus, the inclusion of these certifications in post-pandemic practicum delivery is also recommended.

Aside from improving their skills in completing tourism and hospitality work, the students gained important life skills that include adapting to foreign cultures, remaining calm and patient when dealing with people of various temperaments, making decisions independently, adjusting to the long hours required at work, and being more personable. Developing cultural knowledge and sensitivity is thus seen as another key aspect of the practicum plan.

Several students experienced difficult living conditions, i.e., inconvenience in commuting to work, poor ventilation and water supply in the dormitories, which imply the need for setting their expectations early on what to expect so they could prepare accordingly. Such briefing can be included in the pre-practicum and career orientation seminars for students, which they perceived as helpful in preparing them for an international internship. In a post-pandemic setting, similar skills in adapting to one's environment can still be developed, by letting students identify, and propose solutions to address, the constraints (e.g., limited mobility) in completing practicum tasks.

The above considerations can be included in preparing the practicum learning continuity plan that the CHED requires. Table 6 summarizes these alternative learning experiences that the HEI in this study intends to include in the work portfolio that students can complete in place of on-site practicum for schoolyear 2021 to 2022.

Table 6. Alternative practicum learning experiences

Desired Learning Outcome	Alternative learning experiences
Knowledge of other cultures, which could lead to cultural sensitivity	Virtual cultural tours
Guest handling	Virtual environments that simulate employee-guest interactions
	Training and certification on becoming guest service professionals
Food handling	Training and certification related to food and beverage services, safe food handling, HACCP

Desired Learning Outcome	Alternative learning experiences
Guiding and escorting	Learning activities that require students to facilitate virtual tours Training and certification in tour guiding
Report preparation	Training and certification in the use of property management and global distribution systems that include report generation
Coordination	Learning activities such as planning and conducting events, entail coordinating with various offices. Training and certification in event management services are recommended.
Creative output such as food styling and event styling	Learning activities on latte art, fruit and vegetable carving, pastry decorating, and themed table set up are recommended.

Because the pandemic has not ended yet, proposed practicum arrangements would certainly continue to change (San Juan, 2020). Should the government further relax the restrictions in holding in-person classes, limited on-site reporting can be included in the learning plan. Additionally, because practicum is a terminal course requirement, the learning experiences proposed in Table 6 can also be integrated earlier in the program, in other professional courses, to reinforce learning.

The HEI in this study should consider building strong partnerships with selected host establishments that would agree to provide the students with either virtual learning activities or limited face-to-face, on-site training. Student performance should be assessed using criteria relevant to the industry and the HEI. Additionally, HEIs should continue asking students to narrate and reflect on their experiences in a journal, as reflection remains an important way to concretize knowledge. After deriving meaning through reflection, students can proceed to critical thinking or evaluating of information, and finally, refraction or that stage where transformative knowledge happens (Pagano & Roselle, 2009).

Additional studies on post-pandemic practicum delivery are needed to recognize the constancy of change. Future studies can include the perspectives of host establishments and students, which would lend a more accurate view of WIL issues that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the learning that students derive from paid and unpaid internships can also be explored, as the researcher used data only from students' experiences in paid, international internships. Qualitative data analysis software is also recommended to facilitate coding, especially when dealing with voluminous data, such as in the present study.

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