Bridging Practice and Learning: A Content Analysis of Student Internship Experiences in Hospitality and Transportation Sectors

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A B S T R A C T

Internships serve as a critical component of tourism and hospitality education, offering students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of two diploma student internship reports, focusing on placements at the international chain hotel and local tourism transportation. The analysis reveals four key thematic areas: *task performance and role clarity, professional behavior and service ethics, technological adaptation,* and r*eflections on learning and career readiness*. Findings indicate that while students gained valuable operational experience and service skills, there was limited evidence of structured reflection and mentoring as the elements crucial for maximising learning outcomes and employability. This study contributes to the discourse on work-integrated learning by highlighting the need for improved internship design, including feedback mechanisms and alignment with digital and soft skill development. Implications are discussed for educators, industry partners, and policymakers aiming to enhance the effectiveness of vocational training in tourism education.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

Internships have become an essential component of tourism and hospitality education, offering students critical exposure to real-world industry environments and the opportunity to develop both technical and interpersonal competencies. Increasingly embedded in vocational and higher education curricula, internship programs serve not only as a transition from classroom to career but also as a means to enhance students' employability and industry readiness (To & Lung, 2020; Ng et al., 2022). Within the service-driven sectors of hospitality and transportation, internships are particularly significant due to the emphasis on customer interaction, service delivery, and adaptability in dynamic work environments.

A growing body of research highlights the positive impacts of internships when they are well-structured and guided. Key factors contributing to internship satisfaction include supervisor support, task clarity, and the perceived functional and social value of the experience (To & Lung, 2020). These factors also influence the development of self-initiative behavior and career motivation among interns. Similarly, employer branding and the attractiveness of internship advertisements have been shown to shape students' expectations and willingness to participate, yet mismatches often occur between what companies communicate and what students value in terms of personal growth and learning (Plakhotnik et al., 2023).

In the context of tourism and hospitality education, the alignment between academic training and industry needs remains a critical issue. Studies have noted that while universities emphasize theoretical knowledge, industry stakeholders frequently point to gaps in practical skills, decision-making abilities, and customer engagement competencies among graduates (Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2020). Internships, therefore, serve as a crucial platform for bridging this gap, enabling students to acquire job-relevant competencies and evaluate their own fit within the industry (Peng et al., 2024).

Moreover, internships contribute to the development of students' career identity and resilience in facing occupational stigma, especially in sectors like hospitality that may be perceived as having limited prestige or growth opportunities (Peng et al., 2024). As part of broader work-integrated learning (WIL) strategies, internships also play a key role in cultivating digital literacy and adaptability—skills increasingly demanded in post-pandemic service economies (Ng et al., 2022).

This study draws on the theoretical insights from the literature on internship effectiveness, employability, and career adaptability. It explores how students experience internships in Indonesian hospitality and transportation sectors through a content analysis approach. By examining documented internship narratives, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how vocational training contributes to skill development, service professionalism, and perceived employability in the tourism industry.

2. METHODS

To gain a deeper understanding of how internships contribute to students' professional development within the tourism and hospitality sectors, this study employed a qualitative content analysis of student internship reports. Specifically, the analysis focused on two final reports produced by diploma-level students from the Universitas Jember, which documented

their internship experiences at two prominent companies: International chain hotel in Surabaya (hospitality sector) and local transportation service in Jember (transportation sector). Both are in East Java, Indonesia.

Content analysis was selected as the methodological approach to systematically explore the narratives, roles, responsibilities, and reflections presented in the internship reports. As suggested by Bengtsson (2016), content analysis enables researchers to interpret textual data by identifying recurring patterns, themes, and categories within a specific context. This method is especially useful for analyzing internship experiences, as it allows the researcher to derive meaningful insights from the students' personal accounts, including the nature of their tasks, their engagement with workplace structures, and the challenges or competencies developed throughout the internship period.

The first report, authored by Fitrianda (2017), detailed her role as a waiter at the restaurant in the international chain hotel. Her narrative included descriptions of daily operational activities, adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs), customer service practices, and coordination with other departments. The second report, written by Sartika (2017), focused on her internship at local transportation service, a major intercity bus company, where she was involved in customer service, reservation systems, and client interaction during service delivery. The report also provided observations on the transition from manual to digital ticketing systems.

Data were extracted from the full internship texts, with specific attention to descriptions of internship tasks, training processes, interpersonal interactions, use of technology, and reflections on the learning experience. Thematic coding was used to organize these elements into broader categories such as service quality, professional conduct, digital adaptation, and experiential learning. The analysis aimed to understand how students perceived and performed their roles within the context of real-world tourism and hospitality operations, as well as the extent to which their educational background supported their engagement in these industry environments.

3. RESULTS

The content analysis of the internship reports from the international chain hotel and local transportation service revealed four key thematic categories that describe the students' internship experiences: (1) task performance and role clarity, (2) professional behavior and service ethics, (3) technological adaptation and customer service, and (4) reflections on learning and career readiness. These themes illustrate the nature of on-the-job training within both hospitality and transportation sectors and provide insights into students' experiential learning outcomes.

Task Performance and Role Clarity

Both students demonstrated a clear understanding of their assigned roles. At the international chain hotel, the student intern acted as a waiter, responsible for preparing tables, greeting guests, delivering food and beverages, and maintaining restaurant cleanliness. The report highlighted strict adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), with detailed task delegation structured around shifts and service zones. The clarity of tasks

allowed the intern to engage confidently with customer-facing duties and teamwork (Fitrianda, 2017).

In contrast, the student at local transportation services was tasked with handling ticket reservations, interacting with customers, and assisting in scheduling and passenger coordination. The intern also noted an organizational shift from manual to online systems, which changed the nature of routine responsibilities (Sartika, 2017). Despite these shifts, the report described sufficient guidance from supervisors that helped maintain clarity in work expectations.

Professional Behavior and Service Ethics

Both reports emphasized the importance of a professional demeanor in maintaining high service standards. The international chain hotel intern emphasized politeness, patience, and grooming as essential to meeting luxury service expectations. Serving guests with courtesy and addressing complaints with calmness were noted as key learning points. The intern also recognized the need for discretion and communication when handling VIP guests.

At local transportation service, the intern described how customer satisfaction relied heavily on personal interaction, especially during busy travel periods. The importance of punctuality, integrity in handling transactions, and respectful communication with passengers were frequently mentioned. Both experiences reflect the embeddedness of service ethics in hospitality and transportation roles.

Technological Adaptation and Customer Service

The local transport service report offered detailed observations on the transition from manual to digital ticketing systems. The student described learning how to use the online reservation platform, processing bookings, and educating older customers on using digital services. This shift reflected broader digitalization trends in the transportation sector and required adaptive learning and communication skills.

While the international chain hotel report did not directly emphasize digital tools, it highlighted the intern's role in supporting real-time communication among the restaurant team using handheld communication devices and POS (point-of-sale) systems for order processing. These tools were essential for coordinating workflow and ensuring efficient customer service.

Reflections on Learning and Career Readiness

Both students provided limited but insightful reflections on how the internship contributed to their professional growth. The international chain hotel intern reported gaining confidence in handling guest interactions, understanding restaurant workflow, and improving time management. However, the reflection lacked a deep analysis of long-term career implications.

The local transport service intern noted improvements in communication skills and an appreciation for customer expectations in transportation services. However, there was

minimal critical reflection on broader competencies or career planning, indicating the need for more structured reflection processes within internship programs.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings from the content analysis of student internship reports in the hospitality (the international chain hotel) and transportation sectors provide valuable insights into the real-world implementation of vocational training in Indonesian tourism education. The thematic categories, including task performance, professional behaviour and service ethics, technological adaptation and customer service, and reflection on learning and career readiness, highlight several areas of alignment and discrepancy with current scholarly discussions on internship effectiveness, work-integrated learning (WIL), and employability development.

First, the clarity in task delegation and the students' ability to describe their responsibilities in both placements aligns with what To and Lung (2020) describe as the importance of task clarity and supervisor support in enhancing internship satisfaction and performance. The structured environment international chain hotel, where interns were guided by SOPs and operational routines, exemplifies how clear role expectations support the development of workplace competence. However, in both cases, while tasks were clearly outlined, there was limited evidence of structured mentoring or feedback loops, which are emphasized in the literature as essential to sustained learning (Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2020; Plakhotnik et al., 2023).

Second, the emphasis on professional behavior—grooming, ethics, customer courtesy—supports existing findings on the value of soft skills in hospitality and service-based internships (Pusiran et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2024). These behavioral competencies are often more difficult to teach in classrooms, reinforcing the role of internships as critical spaces for developing emotional intelligence, communication skills, and situational judgment, which employers often prioritize over technical abilities (Ng et al., 2022).

Third, the intern's experience in local transportation service reflects a broader shift toward digitalization in transportation services. The exposure to online ticketing systems highlights the need for digital competence among tourism and service management students. As noted by Ng et al. (2022), human capital development through internships now requires integration with technological systems and digital tools, especially in post-COVID service environments. However, the limited discussion of digital tools in the international hotel internship suggests that not all hospitality placements are equally aligned with this trend—raising questions about the consistency of skill exposure across internship sites.

Lastly, while both students documented their tasks and described personal development, the lack of in-depth critical reflection on learning outcomes or career trajectory is noteworthy. Research has emphasized that effective WIL programs should integrate reflective learning mechanisms to support career identity development and long-term employability (Peng et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2022). Without structured reflection and feedback, internships risk becoming routine job placements rather than transformative learning experiences.

These findings suggest that while internships at hospitality and local transport services offer practical value and skill development opportunities, there remains significant room for

improvement in aligning internship structures with best practices in educational design, employer feedback, and reflective learning. Addressing these gaps can enhance students' perceived value of internships and better prepare them for the competitive tourism labor market.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the internship experiences of tourism students through a content analysis of two final reports based on placements at international chain hotel and local transport. The analysis revealed key themes related to task performance, service ethics, technological adaptation, and learning reflection. These themes underscore the value of structured internship programs in exposing students to real-world operational practices within the hospitality and transportation sectors.

The findings confirm that internships contribute to the development of job-specific competencies and soft skills such as communication, discipline, and professionalism. They also highlight the growing importance of digital literacy, particularly in service environments undergoing technological transformation. However, the limited evidence of structured mentoring and critical reflection in both internship experiences suggests that current internship models could be further strengthened.

To enhance learning outcomes and employability, universities and industry partners must collaborate to ensure that internship programs are intentionally designed with clear learning goals, mentorship support, and opportunities for self-evaluation. By aligning internship experiences with the evolving expectations of the tourism and hospitality industries—as emphasized in contemporary literature—educational institutions can better prepare students for sustainable careers in an increasingly dynamic and digitalized service economy.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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7. AUTHORS' NOTE

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