RESEARCH ARTICLE

Practicum Experiences of Tourism Management Students at an Aerospace University: A Case Study

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Abstract

This research explores the diverse experiences of Hospitality and Tourism Management students during their practicum. The objectives are to (1) identify challenges, (2) assess the impact of event participation on academic and personal growth, and (3) propose strategies to strengthen support systems. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with six participants (labeled as A, B, C, D, E, and F), focusing on their assignments, activities, and impacts on academic and personal development. Results reveal varied practicum experiences, from active involvement in school events to immersive fieldwork at locations like Shangri-La Mactan. Participants discussed how these experiences influenced their growth, highlighting improvements in social, problem-solving, and communication skills. Identified challenges, including irregular schedules and interpersonal issues, prompted examination of support networks, industry partnerships, and the role of workshops and conferences in addressing these issues. The research highlights the importance of collaboration between academic institutions and industry partners in providing diverse practicum opportunities. Key insights include networking, event planning, and mentorship. The findings emphasize the critical role of robust support networks in enhancing practicum experiences in hospitality and tourism management, exploring themes such as Fieldwork Depth and Skill Development, Social Dynamics, Inclusivity and Balance, and Responsibility Management. Challenges such as fear of failure and imposter syndrome, which may affect performance, were acknowledged, adding depth to the understanding of students' experiences.

Keywords: *practicum program, hospitality and tourism management, challenges*

Introduction

Internships are essential for comprehensive student development in tourism and travel sectors. Tumer and Sears (2017) argue that these practical experiences provide valuable insights into industry complexities, facilitating a smooth transition from academic to professional life. According to CHED Memorandum Order No. 104, series of 2017, also known as the Revised Guidelines for Student Internship Program in the Philippines (SIPP), the internship program aims to offer students an opportunity to complement formal learning with practical skills, desirable attitudes, and hands-on experience in recognized Training Establishments (CHED, 2017). This approach aligns with the widely held view in tourism academia about the critical importance of experiential learning in preparing students for real-world challenges (Morgan & Levy, 2019).

A Bachelor of Science in Tourism and Travel Management program requires students to complete a practicum, exposing them to real-world applications. This practicum is the culminating experience of the four-year program, mandating 600 hours of on-the-job training (OJT) in accredited travel agencies or hospitality establishments. The practicum programs for the Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management (BSHM) and Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management (BSTM) are designed to immerse students in realistic industry situations. This experience is a core component of the curriculum, valued by the industry as it allows students to practice their skills in a controlled environment under the supervision of potential employers (De La Cruz, Sia, et al., 2023).

Tavitiyaman, Tsui, et al. (2023) note that many students experience stress due to adapting to new, fast-paced environments, from the initial interview to the conclusion of the internship. The pressure of working full-time in busy professional settings can be challenging, as students navigate the demands of branded or high-profile organizations. Research has shown that a majority of students view tourism as a short-term career, which can lead to knowledge loss from the industry (Bednarska & Olszewski, 2014).

The researchers aim to explore why some students face challenges during their practicum. Observations indicate that tourism management graduates often struggle to adapt to various environments, such as hotels, airlines, and travel agencies, which can be

disorienting. Limited prior real-world experience may make it difficult for some to meet the industry's demands. This study seeks to understand these challenges and propose actionable strategies to address them.

Research Question/ Objectives

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the practicum experiences of students in the Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management program?

2. What challenges do Tourism Management students encounter during their practicum?

3. What opportunities can be explored to address the challenges faced by Tourism Management students in their practicum?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, gathering data through various qualitative methods, including interviews, field notes, diaries, and observations (Nasajji, 2020). The research design, setting, sampling, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and researcher reflexivity are outlined below.

Research Design

The primary objective was to examine practicum practices for tourism management students in an aerospace-centered setting. Although the tourism industry may seem unrelated to aerospace, this study explored the unique opportunities and challenges this environment presented to tourism management students during their practicum. A single case study approach was used to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) recommended a single case study for examining specific individuals or groups.

Participants/Respondents

The study involved fifteen graduates from the Bachelor of Science in Tourism and Travel Management program. A purposive sampling method was applied. With assistance from the department head, participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) a graduate of the Tourism Management program, (b) completion of the required practicum hours, (c) residency in Cebu City, and (d) English language proficiency.

Instruments

The researchers used a self-designed interview guide to collect relevant information. Interviews were recorded to capture participants' experiences, challenges, and opportunities encountered during their on-the-job training. These data helped provide insight into how the training program influenced the participants' skill development and understanding of interdisciplinary learning.

Procedure

Data were gathered through extensive interviews with selected participants. Prior to data collection, the researchers designed a framework to ensure the collection of relevant and objective information. Data were gathered through interviews, record-keeping, and referencing reliable sources. This study followed Creswell's (2012) seven phases of data collection: (1) selecting eligible participants, (2) obtaining necessary permissions, (3) assuring confidentiality and anonymity, (4) starting data collection promptly, (5) documenting interviews, (6) discussing field notes with participants, and (7) coding and storing data systematically. All responses were protected to ensure privacy and security. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the department's dean. Interviews were recorded, with participants responding to questions outlined by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Yin's (2003) systematic approach, involving organized collection and transcription of interviews and observation notes. The analysis steps were as follows: (1) thorough reading of transcribed interviews, (2) highlighting key points and phrases, (3) coding key phrases into hierarchical categories, (4) comparing data within and across cases to identify similarities and differences, (5) identifying recurring themes or patterns that illustrated significant experiences, and (6) quoting notable phrases that captured thematic elements.

Results

After analyzing the transcripts from in-depth interviews for the study titled [Title of Your Study], the researchers identified five main themes: (1) Depth of Field Work and Skill Cultivation, (2) Social Dynamics, (3) Nurturing Inclusivity, (4) Balancing Responsibilities Between Duty and Development, and (5) Community Engagement. The following are the participants' significant responses:

Theme 1: Depth of Field Work and Skill Cultivation

This theme reflects a deep engagement with practical tasks and emphasizes developing skills through real-world applications and immersive fieldwork. "Depth of Field Work" signifies an exploration beyond theoretical learning, while "Skill Cultivation" highlights the deliberate improvement of abilities within the field.

Participant A shared:

"I was given the opportunity to work as a trainee at Shangri-La Mactan. I was able to experience the actual field work, from the easiest tasks to the most challenging ones. I learned so much from the 6 months I worked as a trainee."

Participant B expressed,

"Honestly, I was the type of student who just focused on her academics, so basically, I can just count on one hand how many events I participated in, but with those events, I did have fun and gained some friends and knowledge."

Participant C stated:

"During my practicum, it was fun and memorable. It also gave me real insights into how the real world works."

Participant D commented,

"Regarding participation in school events, since I was a transferee and enrolled during the pandemic, I was not quite active because it was an online class. Given the chance, if I could have participated more, I'd do so."

Participant E remarked,

"I was able to have a realization that greatly impacted my perspective in this field. It became clear that tourism isn't merely a pursuit."

Participant F noted,

"During my practicum or OJT, I had a funny experience in the tourism office. I was working with the government, organizing events and tracking the number of tourists in and out of Lapu-Lapu."

According to Hunt, Hall, et al. (2023), fieldwork helps bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios.

Theme 2: Social Dynamics

This theme reveals a journey of social growth, highlighting the importance of relationships, community belonging, and social skill enhancement. It covers the balance between academic pressures and social activities.

Participant A said,

"Being active enables you to learn new things by participating in events. Events are good practice grounds to apply and develop skills, and they can be venues to meet new people and build relationships."

Participant B added,

"It encourages me to engage more in school events for self-improvement and development."

Participant C explained,

"Participating in school events makes me feel like I truly belong at IAU. It makes me want to spend more time at IAU and gives me hope of graduating with good grades."

Participant E observed,

"Participating in school events improved my studies and relationships with other members of the university community."

Participant F noted,

"Working on events improves your social skills and prepares you for the real world, especially in the tourism industry, like in hotels and airports."

Farzan (2018) described social support navigation as a natural tendency to connect with others, which becomes especially helpful when facing uncertainty.

Theme 3: Nurturing Inclusivity and Achieving Balance

This theme addresses balancing personal and professional obligations, dealing with stress, and the challenge of maintaining social connections amidst these pressures.

Participant A shared,

"During my internship, I had no work-life balance. Working far away with such a busy schedule meant giving up socializing; I often stayed in to catch up on sleep."

Participant B added,

"One challenge was the fear of failure or not meeting expectations. This sometimes stopped me from taking risks or exploring new

opportunities during my practicum.”

Participant E said,

“Adjusting to a new setting was initially challenging, but it turned into a chance to improve my flexibility and time management.”

Participant F stated,

“For me, doing the practicum while managing other remaining subjects felt hectic.”

Participant G commented,

“I lacked confidence at the beginning, especially with the age differences between me, my co-OJTs, and the regular staff.”

Armour (2022) emphasized that nurturing inclusivity and achieving balance enriches the learning experience by valuing diverse strengths and perspectives.

Theme 4: Managing Responsibilities Between Duty and Development

This theme explores the struggle to balance practical duties with academic growth, highlighting participants' commitment to managing both.

Participant A reflected,

“Working at a 5-star hotel required flexibility. During my OJT, I was assigned to multiple roles within our outlet, which helped me learn new skills.”

Participant C noted,

“Assignments involved managing schedules, engaging in activities related to tourism, and meeting stakeholders. This helped me understand why I chose this course.”

Participant E shared,

“My roles included customer service, accounting, and social media management. These experiences improved my communication, marketing, and social skills, which boosted my confidence.”

Participant F added,

“Participating in school events helped me improve my communication and self-esteem, enabling me to interact comfortably with people from different backgrounds.”

Deveci and Ayish (2017a) argued that personal responsibility promotes lifelong learning, a key to academic and personal success.

Theme 5: Community Engagement

This theme highlights the importance of partnerships and collaboration between the university and community members to foster mutual benefits and address shared challenges.

Participant B suggested,

“Organizing networking events that connect students with Tourism Industry professionals can encourage networking, relationship-building, and knowledge exchange.”

Participant C observed,

“I've heard NCII training and tourism office seminars are available; I hope Indiana will continue collaborating to expand training and seminars.”

Participant F noted,

“Training and seminars, such as bartending or food preparation, would be beneficial for students considering careers in the hotel industry.”

Participant E emphasized,

“The institution can strengthen peer support networks to promote skill development and confidence-building among practicum students.”

Wisdom (2023) stressed that local community involvement is essential for sustainable development in tourism, with the community playing a unique role in this process.

Conclusion

Based on the study findings and insights from the seven participants, the following conclusions were drawn:

This study aimed to evaluate the readiness and capabilities of Tourism Management students at an Aerospace University for entering the competitive tourism industry. The study focused on themes including depth of fieldwork and skill development, social engagement, fostering inclusivity, and balancing duties and personal growth, all contributing to the success of the university's practicum program.

Significantly, this research offers a detailed assessment of the students' preparedness for the tourism field, pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement in both academic and practical aspects. These insights provide educators, curriculum designers, and industry partners with actionable guidance. The findings help to address the gap between academic training and industry requirements, thereby enhancing the employability and adaptability of graduates in the fast-changing tourism sector.

The implications of this research extend broadly, offering valuable recommendations for curriculum development within the Tourism Management program at Indiana Aerospace University. The results guide program enhancements that better meet the evolving needs of the tourism industry.

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