Work-based Learning (WBL) Hospitality Graduates Attachment: Industry Perspectives

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Abstract

The tourism and hospitality sector plays a crucial role in the services industry, functioning as one of the primary contributors to the Malaysian economy. The hospitality industry's performance is closely tied to its significant contribution to job creation, particularly through the employment of hotel staff. The students participating in work-based learning (WBL) industrial attachment or training were utilized as a valuable resource for the hotel's workforce in the form of workers. Given the ever-evolving nature of the education sector, it is crucial to actively participate in the development of curricula that are in accordance with the requirements of the industry. This study investigates instructional practices in the field of hospitality and the concomitant expectations that are linked to these practices. The purpose of this study is to present qualitative data on the perspectives of employers in the hotel industry regarding the industrial attachment experiences of Work-Based Learning (WBL) graduates. This study utilizes a research approach grounded in qualitative technique. The data employed in this study were acquired from a combination of primary and secondary sources. Specifically, primary data was collected through conducting in-depth interviews, while secondary data was gained through evaluating documentary evidence. A series of interviews were conducted with twelve (12) department heads representing a range of hotels in the Klang Valley region. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed using content analytic approaches with the aid of the NVivo 10 software application. The study's findings revealed several interesting insights from industry players perspectives, which have been categorized according to the positive perceptions and conflicts that arose during graduates' industrial attachment period. These findings are classified into WBL Graduates Commitment and Work-ethic, competencies, technology literacy and communication skills. The report concludes by providing recommendations for future research.

1 Introduction

The tourism and hospitality sector are a major contributor to many countries economy worldwide including Malaysia (Islam, Jantan, Yusoff, Chong & Hossain, 2023) and a sector of considerable significance within the services industry. It is reported that from year 2011 to 2019, the economy of Southeast Asia experienced an annual growth rate of 3.7%. During this period, the region achieved its highest recorded annual growth rate of 6.7% in terms of travel and tourism GDP per capita, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2021).

Indeed, the performance and prosperity of tourism and hospitality industry are heavily contingent upon the contributions and capabilities of their workforce. Hotel industry as vital component in tourism and hospitality, is characterized by its focus on providing service, and the reputation and performance of a hotel can be significantly impacted by the level of service delivered by its workforce. The effectiveness and smooth functioning of a hotel's operations rely heavily on the efficiency and competence of its staff. A well-trained workforce plays a crucial role in ensuring that all tasks, ranging from room cleaning to meal service, are executed with effectiveness and adhere to elevated standards. This workforce includes permanent staffs and trainees ranging from typical intern/trainee who undergone a practical training with a duration of one (1) semester, roughly four (4) to six (6) months to work-based learning (WBL) students who undergone industrial attachment two (2) semesters, roughly eight (8) months in the industry.

Students participating in work-based learning (WBL) industrial attachments are considered to be a valuable component of the hotel's workforce (Carty, 2021). Work-based Learning (WBL) refers to a classification of university programmes that involve the collaboration between universities and work organizations in order to establish novel learning possibilities within the workplace (Lemanski, Mewis, Overton, 2011). Maintaining relevance among rivals is crucial for contributing to the education field and ensuring the sustainability of higher learning institutions. Consequently, the growing significance of WBL in higher education programmes is evident due to societal expectations for students to be employable and receive skills training (Christensen et al., 2017).

Many of both public and private universities in Malaysia place significant emphasis on the incorporation of industrial attachment as a compulsory component within the curriculum of the hotel management programme including the WBL academic structure. The word is alternatively referred to as industrial training, practical training, or internship. This study will comprehensively employ the concept of industrial attachment. The purpose of this industrial attachment is to provide students with a transitional experience that aids in their transition from an academic environment to the professional realm. The active participation of students in a real work setting during

their industrial attachment is vital as it facilitates the acquisition of practical experience. Multiple scholarly papers that suggest organizations frequently utilize WBL industrial attachment as a means of recruiting and selecting potential employees (Hussain, Ragavan, Tang, Loong & Teare, 2020; Bahl & Dietzen, 2019; Carty, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the importance of graduates as the potential employees for hotels, the sector has encountered a persistent issue in generating graduates who possess an adequate level of industry knowledge and skills, enabling them to secure employment immediately upon graduation (Kim & Jeong, 2018). Given the inherent characteristics of the hospitality sector and its reliance on the performance of employees and their interactions with guests (Belias et al., 2020), the acquisition of capable personnel is a critical consideration for the sustained development of hospitality organizations in both the immediate and long-term (Nguyen, 2019).

It is imperative for graduates to possess not only the essential technical and practical abilities, but also demonstrate a proactive attitude towards adapting to the dynamic nature of the business environment. The attainment of these objectives is contingent upon the effective collaboration of pertinent parties in the pursuit of a shared goal. Given the ever-evolving nature of the education sector, it is crucial to partake in the development of curricula that are in accordance with the requirements of the industry (Kapoor, Singh, & Manchanda, 2023). An industry-driven course framework facilitates the students' readiness for employment, ensuring a smooth transition into professional environments. The curriculum facilitates the integration of theoretical knowledge into real-world contexts using several methodologies, including case studies, research, event management, live projects, and on-the-job training. In order to gain a complete understanding of the issue at hand, this study sought to address the perceptions of the industry players towards WBL graduates' performances in hospitality field. There is still limited research on the effectiveness of industry-education partnerships, particularly in relation to emerging hotels industry (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Researchers believed with the findings of this study it will assist in equipping graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in the hospitality profession, thus increasing their employability. Universities and institutions of higher learnings can probably use strategies to enhance the development of competences for graduate employability.

2   Hospitality and Tourism Education

The hospitality and tourism departments within universities are intricate entities that are held to high standards in terms of providing exceptional education, facilitating successful job placement, and conducting valuable research. Academicians faced with major hurdles when it comes to balancing these objectives against economic realities, shifts in guests' behavior and expectations and the rapid advancements in technology. Another factor that contributes to the intricacy is the continuous globalization of the hotel industry, employment opportunities and the increasing prevalence of international education and research partnerships. According to Mohd Yusoff et al. (2020), a significant undertaking in the Malaysia Education 2020-2025 Blueprint involves

the implementation of industry-led curriculum to enhance the employability of graduates and mitigate skills mismatch. Consequently, it is imperative for universities to strengthen their alliances and engage in collaborative efforts with diverse industry stakeholders to jointly develop pertinent curriculum. Efforts are being made to retain skilled workers who can sustain productivity in the crucial sector under consideration. These efforts have prompted calls for Malaysia's universities to play a more significant role in reshaping its graduates to align with the government's education goal.

According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), the Ministry of Education (formerly referred to as the Ministry of Higher Education in 2018) has expressed its ambition to raise the existing graduate employability rate of 75 percent to above 80 percent by the year 2025. It is anticipated that there will be a rise in work opportunities inside this country by the year 2025, aligning with the national employment trends. In order to improve the employability of graduates, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has implemented the 2u2i (two years university and two years industry) programme. This novel educational initiative aims to foster collaboration between universities and industries, enabling the design of curriculum that aligns with industry needs and offering students a more comprehensive work experience. The present education system is undergoing modifications in response to the requirements of 21st-century progress (Edi, Ambiyar, Verawardina, Samsir & Watrianthos, 2021). Consequently, it is imperative to prioritise and address the quality of educational outcomes throughout this era of educational reform. The needs for the growth of educational quality in 2020 are predicated upon four fundamental strategies at the national level. These strategies encompass the synchronisation of opportunities, relevance, quality, and efficiency. The synchronisation and synergy of three key aspects, namely government education policy, the quality of undergraduate graduates generated by universities and employment demands, have been identified as imperative (Edi et al., 2021).

The research on sustainable practises in the hospitality and tourism industry, led by the United Nations (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2015), typically begins by emphasising the role of Higher Education (HE) in preparing graduates to effectively fulfil their responsibilities as responsible and ethical stewards (Dredge et al, 2013). It is crucial to provide the upcoming cohort of hospitality and tourism professionals with the necessary skills and abilities (Alexakis & Jiang, 2019) to enhance their employability and contribute towards the attainment of the United Nations' sustainable development goals by 2030. The UN-Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) encompass a comprehensive framework of 17 interconnected objectives that delineate strategies for fostering global improvement through sustainable practises (Eteiwy, 2020). Therefore, these tools are extensively utilized by governmental entities, organizations and universities with a particular emphasis on achieving certain objectives associated with each goal. The authors of this research have characterized this study within the research environment, SDG4, which pertains to Quality Education (Alarcon & Cole, 2019).

3 Methodology

The research methodology utilized in this paper is qualitative in nature. The information utilized in this research was acquired from a variety of sources, including primary and secondary materials. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted, and documentary evidence was analyzed. The research team conducted interviews with twelve (12) department leaders / Head of Departments (HOD) from different hotels located in the Klang Valley area. The 12 department head interviewees were selected based on the justifications as below: i) attached in the department that have direct contact and foresee the performance of WBL students such as in Front Office, Housekeeping, Food & Beverage, Banquet, Sales & Marketing and Human Resource. ii) have at least 5 years working experiences managing the department. Respondents Profile can be viewed from Table 1 below. Every hotel that participates in this study has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOA) with the university and WBL graduates (current & alumni) who are working in several departments including front desk, housekeeping, food and beverage, kitchen and Sales & Marketing. All respondents were contacted beforehand to obtain their consent and agreement to participate in this study. The interviews were conducted in hotels located in the Klang Valley, with each respondent being allocated an approximate time slot of thirty to forty-five minutes. Notwithstanding this, data saturation was observed throughout the sixth respondent's interrogation. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed with the aid of the NVivo 10 software application using content analytic techniques.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

Code	Gender.	Age Group	Managerial Experiences(years)
Respondent 1	Male	36-45	8
Respondent 2	Male	36-45	7
Respondent 3	Female	46-55	9
Respondent 4	Male	46-55	10
Respondent 5	Female	36-45	12
Respondent 6	Male	46-55	11
Respondent 7	Female	26-35	8
Respondent 8	Male	26-35	9
Respondent 9	Male	36-45	6
Respondent 10	Female	36-45	5
Respondent 11	Female	26-35	5
Respondent 12	Female	26-35	5

Self-compiled by authors

4   Findings and Discussions

4.1 Insights from Industry Players

Findings and discussions below displayed several interesting insights from industry players perspectives, which have been categorized according to the positive perceptions and conflicts that arose during graduates' industrial attachment period. These findings are classified into WBL Graduates Commitment and Work-ethic, competencies, technology literacy and communication skills.

4.1.1 WBL Graduates Commitment and Work-ethic

Employers' perceptions of Work-Based Learning (WBL) graduates completing their industrial attachment at all twelve (12) hotels involved in this study may differ, contingent upon the particular employer and the performance of the student in question. Nevertheless, majority of the respondents, evaluated WBL graduates during their industrial attachment as those who exhibit a robust work ethic, an eagerness to acquire knowledge and a dedication to their position. Reliability and punctuality are essential qualities that generally perceived favorably by these respondents.

"I appreciate the gesture that this group of interns (WBL) willing and eager to learn. I remembered one WBL intern, bring with her notebook everywhere. She jots down all important info during briefing and make point to ask supervisor or manager when hotels are least busy." (Respondent 6)

"The teamwork, able to cope with environment surroundings, very professional and good work ethics are excellent. They understand in order to succeed as one department, they need to help each other". (Respondent 2). "We don't treat our WBL students as intern or partimers, infact we treat them as permanent staffs. I had good experienced so far with WBL interns in my department, they are reliable and come early to work. They are really punctual". (Respondent 5)

It is worth noting that respondents may hold a positive perception of Work-Based Learning (WBL) graduates when they exhibit a strong dedication to both personal and professional development. This may encompass soliciting comments, participating in training programmes conducted by hotels, and actively endeavoring to enhance their performance. In conjunction with that, professionalism is a highly esteemed attribute within the hotel sector, encompassing behaviors, appearance and an attitude of respect. Findings indicated that the industry players as employers have certain expectations about the maintenance of elevated levels of professionalism from their WBL graduates. On the other hand, the significance of teamwork in the hotel sector cannot be overstated, since hotels frequently depend on cooperative efforts to provide exceptional service. Thus, respondents highly priorities WBL graduates who possess strong interpersonal skills and demonstrate the ability to effectively collaborate with their colleagues.

4.1.2 WBL Graduates Competencies

The tourism and hospitality business are recognized as a highly dynamic and continuously evolving sector within a nation's economy. However, hotel managers have expressed concerns with regards to certain quality that WBL graduates are lacking. This is in line with what had been highlighted in the literature that indicated the lack of alignment between the present demands of the industry and the quality of graduates in the field of hospitality (Ushakov, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the proliferation of hospitality programmes available globally, there exists considerable divergence in the arrangement of curriculum and the substance of courses (Ricci, 2010).

Competencies covers knowledge, skills and attributes essential for effective job performance (Jeou-Shyan et al, 2011). Majority of the respondents agreed that WBL graduates were lack in problem-solving skills. Among the problem-solving scenarios in the hotel comprise of reservation overbooking, guest complaints, maintenance issues, technical failures, guests' special requests, food & beverage issues, emergency situations like fire or medical crises and handling difficult guests.

"We practiced empowerment with all our staffs. This is especially important when other superior such as Manager and Supervisors are not around, and they need to make decision on behalf of the team. We expect them to be able to solve problems. But the qualities of problem-solving skills are the one that they are lacking". (Respondent 1).

"I encountered one scenario where this trainee has to entertain guest complaint on guest billing upon check-out. The guest argued why the restaurant charge is not tally from the invoice she received and what had been charged in the guest folio. The trainee doesn't know what to do, probably she's panic. She can just call the restaurant straight away and solve the problem instead of just standing in front of the guest". (Respondent 3).

Hotel Managers believed that by possessing the capacity to recognize concerns, evaluate challenges and formulate workable resolutions will be an advantage for graduates in any professional environment. This is in line with Nolan et al. (2010) study, indicated that graduates lack sufficient preparation for the practical aspects of the industry's work environment and do not possess the necessary skills to properly handle their responsibilities in the workplace. In addition, Huang et al. (2016) conducted research to ascertain the level of preparedness among hospitality students for undergraduates' employment. The findings indicated that the industry prefers to hire candidates with exceptional intrinsic qualities, including a pleasant personality, ethical conduct, and a positive attitude, over those with technical competencies, even for entry-level positions (Huang et al., 2016). The significance of soft skills in the hotel industry has been increasingly emphasized in previous research concerning the fundamental hospitality competencies (Talawanich & Wattanacharoensil, 2021). Hence, it is imperative for hospitality educators to engage in collaborative efforts with industry partners in order to critically evaluate the focal points and pedagogical methodologies employed in the curriculum of their respective educational institutions, with the

ultimate aim of enhancing the employability prospects of their students (Jack et al., 2017). At the moment, efforts made through collaborative teaching and industry round-table discussions for curriculum review between academicians-industry partners are commendable.

4.1.3 WBL Graduates Technology Literacy

Interestingly, majority of the respondents agreed that WBL graduates are tech-savvy and computer literate. Possessing fundamental computer abilities and a working knowledge of prevalent workplace software and tools is crucial for numerous positions in hotels whether they are working in front of the house departments (Front Office, Food & Beverage, Sales & Marketing) or back of the house (Housekeeping, Finance, Human Resource, Kitchen and Purchasing).

"We implemented social media as part of our marketing tools to promote this hotel. I can see that this generation are well-versed with Socmed. One of the trainees even taught me how to use TikTok". (Respondent 3). "It only took the trainee less than a month to get familiar with the hotel system that we are using. When I asked them, are you using the same system back then in your university, he said no. So that's wonderful!" (Respondent 4).

The increasing pace of technological progress in recent years has resulted in a demand for hospitality graduates who possess specialized knowledge in information technology (IT). In this regard, it is imperative for hospitality universities to play a role in facilitating graduates' acquisition of the requisite skills and knowledge needed to enter the industry (Millar et al., 2010). Several short courses were conducted in universities with regards to technology such as video editing, exploring apps and tools for better presentation such as Canva, Prezi, PowerPoint, Google Slides, Powtoon, Visme, Haiku Deck. Educators have recognized the necessity of prioritizing the training of graduates in the utilization of industry-specific, end-user, strategically oriented applications such as Micros, SPSS and Excel even back then in 2014 (Bilgihan et al., 2014). In parallel with the growing prevalence of IT proficiency, the growing significance of financial management and online distribution channels (such as global distribution systems and online travel agencies) in the hospitality sector has given rise to the fields of revenue management and e-commerce. Consequently, substantial endeavors are being made by the hospitality industry and educators to address the resulting knowledge deficit (Dopson, 2005).

4.1.4 WBL Graduates Communication Skills

The hospitality sector places significant importance on the necessity of effective communication with both customers and staff. Majority respondents postulated that they valued WBL graduates who possess the ability to speak in a clear and professional manner. Nevertheless, there is a prevailing perception that students are not adequately equipped to handle interpersonal communication skills in the workplace (Lolli, 2013). This supports the findings of this study:

"One example I can elaborate is on fulfilling the guest requests, in one scenario handled by the trainee. When our guests called for extra towels or amenities, the message may not be communicated from the front desk to the appropriate departments. Ending up, unfulfilled guests requests. I discovered that no appropriate follow-up being made on the guest's request causing a communication breakdown." (Respondent 4).

The overall success of a hotel is significantly influenced by the level of guest satisfaction, the efficiency of operations, and the effectiveness of communication. Communication skills are vital in hotel industry. Hotel personnel, including those at the front desk, in the dining area, and in maintenance, engage in direct communication with guests. Effective, cordial and transparent communication is critical for ensuring that guests have a pleasant stay. Moreover, effective communication facilitates the comprehension of the preferences, requirements and necessities of guests. Enhanced staff communication and ability to meet these requirements result in increased guest satisfaction and the possibility of recurring patronage.

In conjunction with that, the reputation of a hotel can be considerably influenced by guest reviews and online evaluations. The consistent delivery of great service by employees has the potential to elicit good reviews, whilst bad encounters might lead to unfavorable ratings. The alignment of industry requirements with hospitality education programmes has the potential to enhance the reputation of universities among students and industry partners, hence improving the employability of graduates (Cheung et al., 2010). The integration of theory in university and practice in industry in the field of hospitality education is crucial (Zhou, Wang & Abukhalifeh, 2021). The findings of this study highlight the necessity for further comprehensive investigation in order to support the sustainable development of the hospitality workforce especially in Malaysia industry.

To improve students' comprehension of industry expectations and the requisite support provided by universities, it is crucial to establish unambiguous definitions and mutually agreed-upon roles and contributions between these two entities via a strategic partnership (Zhou, Hu, Li, Wen, 2022). Conversely, periodic visits by universities to industries can serve as a mechanism for fostering communication and comprehension among the respective stakeholders. Furthermore, these excursions present a valuable occasion to enhance and evaluate the WBL curriculum's design and content in a bigger picture, thereby guaranteeing its alignment with the requirements and expectations of the industry.

5 Conclusion

Within the contemporary educational context, WBL graduates are driven to actively participate in a competitive milieu and exhibit adaptability in order to effectively fulfil the ever-increasing requirements of the industry. The provision of industrial attachment opportunities facilitates a symbiotic relationship between students, industries, and universities. Considering the inherent significance of industrial attachments in the

development of hotels workforce, it is crucial to ensure that graduates participating in such attachments met the expectations and requirements of the industry. Consequently, several overarching concerns pertaining to industrial connection have surfaced, thereby warranting further investigation and scholarly discussion from other stakeholders focusing on the viewpoints of academicians and graduates. The importance of providing high-quality education and incorporating industrial attachment programmes at the postsecondary level cannot be emphasized in terms of the progress and success of the hotel industry. However, it is crucial for future research to thoroughly assess the current technique utilized in industrial attachment courses, while considering the viewpoints of university academics and students. The results of this study provide a foundation for the implementation of industry-focused educational programmes that can greatly enhance the confidence and employability of hospitality graduates as they transition into the professional employment and valuable tool for evaluating and enhancing universities undergraduate education programmes. Additionally, future research can focus on collaboration between the industry and educational institutions through novel hospitality training programs conducted by industry to address skills gap in the hospitality industry.

6   About the author

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