Assessing Placement Students Perceptions of University Support Through the Critical Incident Technique

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Abstract

Sandwich placements are a pivotal point in hospitality management education, where students can develop and exercise the skills, knowledge and attitude required for a career in the industry. However, it is common for students to experience difficulties whilst on placement, requiring the support of higher education institutions. This research explores the challenges faced by hospitality undergraduates who completed a twelve-month industry placement in 2022 and analyses their perceptions of university support by applying the critical incident technique as an underpinning theoretical approach. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to explore the critical incidents experienced by students and to understand how university support assisted in overcoming challenges. Results of the narrative analysis revealed that the most common negative critical incidents experienced by students involved placement location, conflicts with managers and colleagues, and poor programme coordination. Furthermore, whilst students felt university placement support was accurate to their requirements, a lack of experiential learning was identified, negatively affecting the overall placement experience. This study concludes that despite the challenges faced, students viewed their placement as a vital step in their learning that has improved their chances of a successful career in hospitality.

Keywords: Hospitality management education, sandwich placements, well-being, job satisfaction, university support

INTRODUCTION

Due to the effects of the global labour shortage on the hospitality sector, educating and maintaining qualified employees has become a crucial factor for the sustainable development strategy of institutions and organisations (Vo, Le & Lam, 2021). To provide the industry with high-skilled graduates, many higher education institutions incorporate work-integrated learning into the curriculum by offering undergraduate students the opportunity to undertake

a 'sandwich year' placement between their second and final year of studies (Cranston et al., 2020; Lashley, 2022).

According to Yaffe-Bellany (2020), placements are beneficial as they provide an environment for students to apply knowledge and skills, and act as a stepping-stone to full-time work. However, despite the benefits industry placements can provide, it is inevitable that they will also present challenges (Goh & Baum, 2021). Therefore, higher education institutions must prepare students for the realities of full- time work (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Although industry placements are a topic widely researched in academia (Zopiatis et al., 2021), few studies have focused on the perspectives of students; thus, a gap in research has formed surrounding students' perspectives towards university support. Therefore, the following study aims to understand the workplace difficulties faced by students on placement and to determine their impression of the support provided by the university in response through the Critical Incident Technique (CIT).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Benefits and Challenges of Placements

A sandwich year consists of a twelve-month industry placement as part of university education, undertaken in a career-relevant field (Ren & McKercher, 2021), providing a bridge between theoretical learning and real-world experience (Bayerleio, & Jeske, 2018).

One of the main benefits of hospitality placements is the development of soft skills, such as communication, professionalism, teamwork, and self-confidence (Losekoot et al., 2018; Danie et al., 2020; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). In addition, placements are recognised for their benefit towards improving students' adaptability, leadership, and financial management (Lam & Ching, 2007). Nevertheless, it is argued that similar skills can be acquired through classroom teaching alone (Steriopoulos et al., 2022). However, as maintained by Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou (2021, p.42), hospitality placements provide an opportunity for students to "link their studies with real-life practice", therefore, allowing students to develop themselves, their knowledge, and their network whilst developing technical skills that are difficult to acquire within the classroom setting (Losekoot et al., 2018).

Furthermore, placements in hospitality are an opportunity for students to acquire and exercise managerial competencies (Kukreti & Dani, 2020; Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021). A study by Christou and Chryssoula (2019) found that seventy-eight percent of students agreed that placements provided them with good hotel operational skills; however, the study also found students to have remained in the same entry-level positions throughout their placement without the possibility of promotion. Similar results were uncovered by Nguyen et al. (2021, p.8), who reported that students often felt "stuck" in the same role without the opportunity for progression. Therefore, students felt they were limited in developing managerial or supervisory capabilities. Difficulty in movement across departments is often caused by ineffective program design, a common challenge students encounter that limits a placement experience (Stansbie & Nash, 2016).

Research into hospitality placements has found that unfavourable conditions are encountered by most students during industry placement, regardless of their background (Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021), and are often caused by long working hours, low pay, and the high pressure of the hospitality industry (Robinson et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2022). Additionally, negative experiences can stem from a lack of supervisor feedback (Seager, 2021) and inappropriate behaviour of co-workers (Kim & Park, 2013; Farmaki, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021). Workplace bullying and abusive co-worker treatment are common challenges for students (Jung & Yoon, 2018; Tews et al., 2019; Mensah et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022), causing them to feel unwelcomed in the working group and experience a perceived lack of fit with the placement provider (Tews et al., 2019; Goodboy et al., 2020). As described by Xu et al. (2022, p.4), a poor perceived person-job fit has negative implications on well-being and can be "manifested as dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, irritation and health complaints". Furthermore, workplace bullying can foster feelings of isolation and increase social anxiety.

However, it is essential to note that despite the challenges faced, a strain of recent research (Christou & Chryssoula, 2019; Hussien & Lopa, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Vo et al., 2021; Armah & Armah, 2021) shows that hospitality students end placements with an overall positive experience. In a study by Christou and Chryssoula (2019), students cited networking opportunities, industry knowledge and skills development, and improved graduate employability as key benefits of undertaking a Sandwich Year placement, whilst the challenges faced differed across hosting organisations.

Student Well-being During Placements

Employee well-being is well-documented in hospitality workforce research and has been associated with job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, poor performance, and high turnover rates (Xu et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021). According to Ramgoolam- Atchiamith et al. (2022), placement students are more likely to report issues with their well-being than full-time employees, as students often struggle to transition from academia to the workplace. Furthermore, research by Christou and Chryssoula (2019) reports that sixty-nine percent of students admit to experiencing a period of disillusionment whilst on placement, caused by being apart from friends and family and the high pressure of the work environment. If not managed appropriately, products of workplace disillusionment, such as frustration, stress, and fatigue, can be internalised and manifest as counterproductive workplace behaviours (Liu et al., 2015; Deng et al., 2018).

However, Cooke et al. (2019) and Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al. (2022) argue that under supportive management, high-pressure environments can develop resilience in students. According to De Clercq and Pereira (2019), individuals learn best how to cope with stress when experiencing hardship as they are provided with an opportunity to reflect on negative experiences (Hardaker et al., 2015). Furthermore, Fehrenbacher and Smith (2014) add that under time pressure, decision-making is faster, thus improving work efficiency and leading to the development of abilities which can build resilience. However, the support Cooke et al. (2019) suggest is required for students to build resilience from a negative experience is rarely provided in hospitality placements due to poor program coordination (Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021). Moreover, a study by Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al. (2022) found no significant links between time pressure and the development of resilience in placement

students. Instead, results from Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al. showed that if not addressed, stress caused by working under time pressure is likely to lead to emotional issues that affect well-being.

In addition to strains on mental health, students report facing challenges with their physical well-being whilst on placement (Vo et al., 2022; Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al., 2022). In the hospitality industry, students often encounter later hours and longer shifts compared to other sectors, which results in higher levels of sleep deprivation (Kim & Qu, 2019; Koc, 2019), increasing the risk of inducing accidents (Lee et al., 2013) and weakening the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to illness (Liew & Aung, 2021). The challenge surrounding health and well-being was magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic when students faced potential exposure and transmission of the virus (Goh & Baum, 2019; Xu et al., 2022).

Managing Student's Experiences

The complex nature of the hospitality work environment makes it challenging to help students benefit from a placement experience in the industry. Research indicates that the majority of students engaged in a sandwich year begin their placement with positive expectations, motivation to gain experience, and a willingness to enter the workforce (Qu et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021). Therefore, it is critical for higher education institutions to manage students' expectations before placement by providing them with a notion of the challenges and demands of work in the sector (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012; Farmaki, 2018). Nevertheless, multiple academics (Armah & Armah, 2021; Lam & Ching, 2007; Vo, Le & Lam, 2022) suggest that higher education does not appropriately prepare students to meet industry requirements and fosters unrealistic expectations regarding employment in hospitality. However, although Zopiatis and Constanti (2007) acknowledge that there are often discrepancies between what is taught in the classroom and what is practised in hotels, they also argue that higher education studies confront students with operational issues and practices to better prepare them for the work environment.

Moreover, higher education providers may offer practical learning opportunities as part of the curriculum for students to develop industry-related skills prior to entering the workplace (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Such opportunities are prevalent in the Swiss Hotel Management Curriculum, a vocationally orientated curriculum that addresses industry needs by incorporating practical learning facilities "such as a hotel offering accommodation, front office, housekeeping, food and beverage outlets, kitchen, and event venues" (Goh & King, 2020, p.267). However, as highlighted by Dicen et al. (2018), the building and operation of such infrastructure is beyond the financial capability of most universities. For this reason, many higher education institutions are increasingly turning away from the vocational aspect of hospitality and towards academic education, requiring a lower level of practical-based learning, and is to the disadvantage of hospitality students (Anderson & Sanga, 2019).

However, higher education institutions can provide students with the support required to succeed in industry placement by developing soft skills, nurturing a good work ethic in students (Daugherty, 2001; Farmaki, 2018), and using alums through presentations and discussions (Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021). Furthermore, higher education

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institutions can manage placement experiences by assigning placement coordinators to plan sandwich year programs with employers, monitor students' progression, offer ongoing consultation, and provide support (Stansbie & Nash, 2016; Wall et al., 2017) in what may likely be a student's first experience of full-time work. Moreover, a university placement coordinator can ensure employers comply with the program guidelines and use their knowledge to identify issues the student may not perceive (Zopiatis and Constanti, 2012).

The Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is a qualitative research method applied during interviews to obtain an in-depth understanding of factors which could affect hospitality students during their placement by encouraging them to reflect on positive and negative experiences (Nguyen et al., 2021). As described by Butterfield et al. (2009), the "CIT explores what helps or hinders in a particular experience or activity" (Butterfield et al., 2009, p.268).

Using the CIT for qualitative research has several advantages. Firstly, it does not restrict interviewees' responses to interview questions by allowing participants to be detailed in their responses, providing better quality data. Moreover, the CIT can be used to explore patterns that emerge during interviews and provide further research areas (Gremler, 2004). Lastly, as the CIT is based on memories of first-hand experiences, the method can be used to identify benefits and issues surrounding hospitality placements to formulate solutions and improve the placement experience for future cohorts (Nguyen et al., 2021). According to Koc et al. (2014), it is essential for students to have a positive placement experience, as it can improve well-being, satisfaction, and help students attain self-realisation.

However, although the CIT has been accepted as a helpful approach in qualitative research, it is not without limitations, as researchers such as Gremler (2004) question the significance of reported incidents. Furthermore, as interview findings are based on participants' memories, the trustworthiness of the results can be questioned (Kornbluh, 2015). However, Patton (2002) argues that interview techniques, such as member checks, can improve the trustworthiness of findings. Member checks consist of soliciting participant perspectives as a follow-up to an interview to verify that findings reflect the participant's intended meanings (Kornbluh, 2015). Therefore, by using member checks, researchers' ethical responsibility to accurately reflect participants' experiences is upheld, and a more holistic understanding of the critical incident is achieved (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who completed a twelve-month Sandwich Placement in 2022. The interviews were undertaken face-to-face for a minimum of ten minutes to allow the development of rapport (King et al., 2019) and provide time for the collection of in-depth data required (Rai & Thapa, 2004).

Moreover, a semi-structured interview technique was selected as it enabled participants to present individual understandings and experiences (King et al., 2019), and is less demanding to manage in comparison to the 'unstructured' style (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, a qualitative research method using the CIT was applied as it allowed for the interviewer to

discover in-depth how work-place incidents had affected students' experiences (Nguyen et al., 2021), and provided a higher level of detail than would have been achieved by using a quantitative data collection method (Flick, 2023).

Seven interview participants were acquired through snowball sampling with an initial sample of five individuals. As described by Teeroovengadum and Nunkoo (2018, p. 482), snowball sampling "requires respondents to refer other potential respondents as subjects for the study" and is one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research due to its convenience, and benefit towards studying scares populations (Parker et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the limitations of snowball sampling are recognised, such as the risk of poor representativeness of the population from which the sample was drawn caused by the close relationship of people in the initial samples (King et al., 2019). However, due to the small size of the research population, the potential for bias in findings caused by the sampling method was low. Furthermore, the sample population can be argued to be representative towards the total population, as gender composition is reflective of research by Schoffstall (2015), who states the average gender composition of undergraduate hospitality cohorts to be sixty seven percent female, and twenty-three percent male. Schoffstall's findings on gender composition are confirmed by Stemele and Sucheran (2021), who uncovered similar results.

The findings collected during the interview process were analysed from audio- recordings of each interview, and hand-written notes made by the researcher of key points provided by the respondent. Participant's responses were then analysed through thematic analysis to understand how critical incidents had affected their placement experience, and to determine their feelings towards the support provided by their university.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:			**Department:**		
Male	2	29%	Front Office	3	42%
Female	5	71%	Food and Beverage	2	29%
Level of Study:			Rotational	2	29%
Level 6	7	100%	**Country:**		
			United Kingdom	6	86%
			Ireland	1	14%

Table 1: Demographic profile of research participants

FINDINGS

Negative Critical Incidents

The negative critical incidents experienced by students can be divided into three categories: placement location ($n = 6$), conflicts with managers and colleagues ($n = 6$), and poor

program coordination (n = 4). Students who mentioned placement location as a negative incident described the difficulties of working and living in remote locations, such as poor access to transportation and limited entertainment facilities. Meanwhile, students who undertook a placement in large cities mentioned the challenges of finding affordable accommodation and navigating COVID-19 restrictions. For example, a student (F4) described their experience as follows:

> Due to the housing crisis and strict covid regulations at the time of my placement, many places didn't even consider me as I was coming from abroad .... I had to isolate for ten days on arrival, and a lot of the time, I would not get a reply [from accommodation providers], and when I did, they would deny me because of this. It took me searching beyond my budget to finally find an accommodation in a small room less than a week before I left.

Meanwhile, participants who cited conflict with managers felt there was poor leadership and ineffective communication. Whilst issues with colleagues resulted from differing viewpoints and incompatible personality types. As mentioned by a student (F3):

> There were challenges in my relationship with my manager as she did not understand me and my work style. I often felt I was being micromanaged, and she put a lot of pressure on us to perform to her standards which made me stressed and afraid to make mistakes.

Lastly, students who identified poor program coordination as a negative incident mentioned a lack of cross-departmental training opportunities, feelings of being taken advantage of by employers, and a lack of motivation.

University Support During Placement

Despite encountering negative incidents, all students described their placement experience as positive overall, as the knowledge and skills gained outweighed the negative experiences encountered. This was due to the negative incidents being isolated events that did not span the entirety of the placement experience, whereas the knowledge and skills gained were valuable assets they could carry towards their future careers.

In addition, all respondents agreed that the university prepared them with the theoretical foundations and knowledge required for a career in the hospitality industry; however, respondents felt that there was a lack of opportunity to develop practical skills. Across all interviews, only two modules were identified to have provided students with practical skills in the food and beverage sector, whilst opportunities for practical experience in housekeeping and front office were absent from the curriculum. Nonetheless, students agreed that a sandwich placement allowed them to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and actual industrial experience. As described by a student (M2):

> The university allowed me to understand how a whole company should work and function according to the books. The practice of those theories happened during placement.

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Moreover, the majority of respondents mentioned valuing the soft skills developed during their academic journey, which better prepared them for navigating the hospitality workplace. Students felt that the soft skills developed at university, such as timekeeping, professionalism, organisation, and self-confidence, improved their performance in busy environments, handling guest complaints and working under pressure. Moreover, students indicated that information technology (IT) skills developed through study were crucial towards their placement's success. As mentioned by a student (F3):

> I am very thankful for the training my university provided on Word, Excel, and PowerPoint in our first year of study. While on placement, we used them every day, and my proficiency made me an asset to the company.

Lastly, all respondents spoke positively of the support from their Placement Academic Advisor (PAA), who assisted students throughout the length of the placement by organising a minimum of three one-to-one meetings to reflect on the performance and development of students and to ensure learning goals were being achieved. Moreover, discussing workplace challenges with their PAA helped students manage expectations and understand the realities of work in hospitality.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that students end placement with an overall positive view towards their experience and gain related benefits such as work experience, the development of hard and soft skills, and the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life scenarios, which is consistent with previous research (Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021; Christou et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Jackson, 2018; Yiu & Law, 2012). However, the study also identified the negative critical incidents that affected students' placement experience, which past studies have failed to explore (Nguyen et al., 2018).

According to research findings, the lead causes for dissatisfaction among students were location, relationships between managers and colleagues, and programme coordination, mirroring previous research by Hussein and Lopa (2018) and Farmaki (2018). However, students failed to mention pay as a demotivator, contradicting recent findings that identify pay as a leading cause of dissatisfaction amongst placement students (Flint & Agarwal, 2018; Marnakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2021; Mensah et al., 2021). According to results from this research, students were satisfied with pay overall, possibly as all students' wages were supplemented with tips reaching up to five-hundred British pounds a month at five-star properties, and therefore, students felt they were being compensated appropriately for their work.

In understanding students' perspectives towards the role their university provided regarding placement, it was found that students viewed their university's support very positively. In line with recent research (Chinomona & Surujlal, 2012; Govender & Wait, 2017; Farmaki, 2018; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Vo et al., 2022), students felt that their higher education institution had prepared them well for the work environment through the improvement of soft skills and character development. For example, students mentioned various opportunities offered by their institution, such as societies and competitions, which allowed

them to improve their self-confidence, public speaking, and professionalism. Moreover, students stated that group activities and in-class presentations helped develop social skills and reduce shyness.

Moreover, students showed high levels of satisfaction towards the support provided by their PAA, confirming research which suggests that continued support from institutions throughout placement is a crucial determinant of student satisfaction and placement success (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012; Stansbie & Nash, 2016; Wall et al., 2017). Moreover, students stated that their PAA had a significant role in managing workplace expectations, as they could ask specific questions about their experiences to determine if their situation was unique or shared across the industry.

However, students were overall dissatisfied with the levels of practical training received at university, and a few students mentioned embarrassment while struggling with everyday tasks such as carrying trays and operating property management systems. According to most respondents, the ability to perform such tasks was expected from a hospitality management student, and managers did not always have time to teach such skills. The lack of practical learning provided by institutions is likely due to decreased funding for vocational subjects, as identified by Anderson and Sanga (2019). However, this study confirms previous research that practical learning is an essential aspect of hospitality education (Lin et al., 2017; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021), and therefore, opportunities to develop industry-related skills within classroom learning should be provided to improve the performance of students in the workplace.

LIMITATIONS

Although the study included students from different cultural backgrounds, only a small number of students were involved in the study, and all belonged to one higher education institution; hence, results are likely to be unreliable and unrepresentative of the general population due to the similar experiences of students. Moreover, as all research participants had a pre-existing relationship with the researcher prior to the study, which would continue after the interview was complete, participants may have withheld information they believed was too personal to discuss or may have formulated answers to agree with the researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Therefore, future research should include a larger number of institutions offering hospitality programmes and involve participants with no previous relationship to the researcher to determine the generalisability of findings.

Moreover, this study was conducted with a cohort that experienced the COVID-19 pandemic during their placement. Therefore, it is likely that if the study is repeated in the future, a different set of results will emerge as students will face fewer limitations in applying to placements, leading to a more extensive research population across a higher number of hosting organisations. Furthermore, results of a future study may show differences in the challenges faced by students as the restrictions of COVID-19 will no longer affect placement experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study confirmed past research on the benefits of industry placement towards the development of students' employability. However, this study has also confirmed past findings of the challenges. Furthermore, this study has concluded that students felt they had an overall positive experience despite the negative incidents they faced.

By focusing on students' perspectives, results have shown that the placement support provided by institutions is accurate to the requirements of work in the hospitality industry and has positively affected student satisfaction. Therefore, this study is a valuable contribution to existing research on industry placements in the hospitality industry.

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