

Virtual internships and work-integrated learning in hospitality and tourism in a post-COVID-19 world

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This article is a scholarly discussion that outlines current studies of virtual training and internships in hospitality and tourism, and questions how these approaches can satisfy hospitality and tourism industry requirements in post-COVID19 environments. It reviews existing literature and compares best-practice approaches. In particular, this study investigates the state of play in three Asia Pacific tourism destinations that each have distinct contextual challenges; Cambodia, Vietnam and Australia. A research concept framework that takes into account the changes to the hospitality and tourism industry due to COVID-19, subsequent changes to industry training mechanisms, and the potential implications for work-integrated learning internship placements for the future generation of students, graduates and industry professionals, is presented. A structure for upcoming studies that compare post-COVID19 hospitality and tourism industry internship potential approaches is proposed for discussion.

Keywords: COVID-19, virtual internships, hospitality and tourism education, work integrated learning, internship

As of August 1, 2020, the time this article was written, there were 17,396,943 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 675,060 deaths, reported to WHO (WHO Coronavirus Disease [COVID-19] Dashboard, n.d.). Statista (n.d.) predicted 100.8 million job losses worldwide in 2020. An average of \$534M in earnings and over 12,000 jobs lost every day in hospitality was forecast. (The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Hospitality, 2020). There are 1.5 billion students (90% of the world's student population) and youth expected to be excluded from formal education (UNESCO Cambodia, 2020).

By March 2020, the impact on the hospitality and tourism industry as the virus transformed into a pandemic was swift and pervasive. As international travel bans restricted over 90% of the global population from traveling, and severe restrictions on community gatherings and mobility were introduced, tourism-related business largely halted (Gössling et al., 2020). The industry's future remains unclear. Although some predictions hold that it will rebound as it has from previous crises (Gössling et al., 2020) and even experience aggressive growth due to pent-up demand, other forecasts are not so directly optimistic. Events and conference tourism dependent on mass gatherings may take a long time to recover; business travel may be widely replaced with online communication; virtual travel may be preferred by some cautious or price-constrained vacationers; and more sustainable travel practices adopted on a broader scale that corresponds to a growing awareness of tourism's environmental impacts (Schott, 2017).

These fundamental changes in the nature of hospitality and tourism markets and products can be linked to future industry capability training, including work-integrated learning. When building training and internship programs, four characteristics are particularly salient in an industry largely dependent on its service product and image. First, the service elements of hospitality and tourism are inseparable; production, delivery and consumption occur simultaneously (Chitty et al., 2019). Therefore, defects are not easily identified or repaired. Second, hospitality and tourism services are human capital intensive, delivered by people. Untrained, unmotivated and/or distracted staff can have

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an enormous impact on the customer experience (Chitty et al., 2019). Third, customers spend significant resources planning and paying for hospitality and tourism services, often sharing their experience with significant others. For corporate travelers, consequences of service faults may impact on business outcomes. For example, an incorrectly scheduled reservation could result in a missed business appointment. Therefore, hospitality and tourism customers generally have high standards and expect brand consistency (Nguyen & Pham, 2020). Positive first impressions and encounters with staff that meet and exceed brand expectations are critical. Fourth, customers come from diverse backgrounds and may be unfamiliar with service conventions and cultural practices in tourist destination environments, especially if they are international travelers. This illustrates the heterogeneity of hospitality and tourism services. Therefore, effective hospitality and tourism internships must not only train staff to perform operational duties, but also to consistently deliver high-level services to a range of customer segments from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This article will review the challenges of delivering effective hospitality and tourism internships in view of the massive impacts that COVID-19 has dealt this industry and aspiring hospitality and tourism interns and graduates. The potential value and limitations of virtual and online internships will be discussed, and the landscape of three prominent tourism destinations (Vietnam, Australia, and Cambodia) outlined. A conceptual framework that will ground a more extensive research investigation will be presented, and its application to future research discussed.

CURRENT INTERNSHIPS IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM

Internships in hospitality and tourism critically develop students' workplace skills, essential to employment in the work domain. Such skill-based learning outcomes assist the learner in blending theory with actual workplace experience (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, students, as interns, may absorb the identity and attitudes of professionals in the industry through observation, interaction, and performance of hospitality role-related tasks (Kraiger et al., 1993). The internship process eases the transition between education and employment in the hospitality environment, and offers accidental learning experiences because of the less predictable nature of real life in an operating environment such as a hotel, and creates effective learning situations for the intern (Candy & Crebert, 1991). Students gain an accurate, authentic understanding of the career they will commit to, and a competitive edge in the marketplace when competing for jobs (Wiseman & Page, 2001). Thus, the experience imparts "a deeper understanding of the soft skills employers in today's market so desperately seek" (Lee, 2008, p. 39).

Furthermore, student interns learn to interact with customers and managers, develop the will to take initiative and basic obligations such as punctuality (Irwin et al., 2012). Improved self-confidence, practical skills and social competencies were found by Tse (2010) and Waryszack (2000). Lee (2008) added that the combination of coursework with exposure to the work environment imparts a full understanding of job requirements, enhances social skills and self-confidence.

Roy and Sykes (2017) proposed a framework that adapts best practices in internships for distance learning hospitality programs; in their framework innovative virtual elements of the program served to prepare students for real placements, and also to develop their self-agency to experience learning in placements distant from the education provider. To adapt to changed hospitality and tourism COVID-19 environments, a closer look at how industry, education providers, and student stakeholders incorporate best practice into extended virtual and online internships is discussed in the next section. In the hospitality and tourism industry, virtual alternatives to traditional internships whether done as

simulated WIL with an external partner, simulated learning solely conducted with the education provider, or as online WIL where the student works directly with the external partner through online channels promise to transform work-integrated learning approaches.

ADAPTING TO CHANGES IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM

COVID-19 has affected every sector and changed businesses across the globe. While there have been other health pandemics that have affected the global economy, the hardest-hit sector by the coronavirus pandemic is the hospitality and tourism industry, due to restrictions on mobility, physical distancing and the fear of getting infected through travel and group gatherings. The uncertainty about the nature of the virus itself and its unprecedented, quick advance has resulted in unmatched cancellations of accommodation, air transport and events, and the shutdown of restaurants, cafés and hotels. Designing spaces for employees and customers that accommodate both service excellence and regulated social distancing will be problematic (Girdhari, 2020a). For example, some guests may prefer buffet meals that allow them the flexibility to serve themselves rather than interact with table service staff. On the other hand, an alternative view is that buffets will be discouraged in the post-COVID-19 environment and that table service will be the preferred method of service by customers. This perhaps highlights the diverging views about how industry practices will change due to the pandemic (Girdhari, 2020a).

Post-COVID-19 will inevitably change the expectations of the customer in relation to service both before and during service interactions (Girdhari, 2020b). Yet unknown measures of service delivery requested and expected by guests mandate a need for hotels and tourism facilities to step up adaptation capability as never before. With limited guidance, most hotels and restaurants are struggling to implement measures for creating high standards of sanitation that will reassure customers, particularly in the early stages of restarted travel plans when customers may be feeling nervous about hygiene (EHL Insights, 2020). Guest interaction will need to be kept at a minimum, but establishments will need to maintain highly responsive services. Venturini (2020) stated that customers would seek greater spiritual and emotional dimensions in hospitality and tourism experiences.

With the prevailing COVID-19 restrictions, many large-scale events such as the Tokyo Olympics have been postponed or cancelled (ICO, 2020). Conference and meeting organizers are converting to a virtual mode for the balance of 2020, and potentially longer. With a need to focus on prioritizing safety for guests and minimizing interaction with hotel staff, Ivan (2020) suggests hotels should make use of digital innovation, implementing technology such as: the IOT (internet of things, utilizing technology to control lighting, room temperature, and other room systems); artificial intelligence; augmented reality, such as virtual tours across the hotel to familiarize guests with facilities; recognition technology that utilizes biometric authentication; and Chatbot (interaction with artificial intelligence through chat displays). Virtual reality technology is increasingly used in hospitality and tourism guest and marketing strategies, for example in operational booking processes, virtual tours, translation, and other tools that extend market engagement reach, help customers plan and transact bookings, and generally maximize their satisfaction (Nayyar, 2018). Training organizations have successfully used online platforms in cooperation with Taiwanese businesses' factory tours in cultural tourism education (Chiao et al., 2018), and virtual field trips (Patiar et al., 2017) without any physical travel. Despite decreasing costs and availability of virtual reality, virtual internships have not been widely adopted, although they have been recognised as potentially valuable to hospitality and tourism students (Barron & Henderson, 2002). It is interesting that although the industry has embraced these visualization technologies in many ways, their use in training and virtual internships is far less prominent.

In an industry landscape transformed by COVID-19, there is also a need for hospitality and tourism education providers that collaborate with hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and other service providers to further develop technology-enabled WIL that supports industry-relevant learning through simulated WIL, simulated learning, or WIL placements conducted in remote WIL contexts. They will need to adapt their curriculum to alternative ways if students are required to complete an internship as part of their degree program in post-COVID-19 environments.

ONLINE AND VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Similar responses have been encouraged by educational institutions with support from governments. For example, Vietnam was slow to take up online learning and online courses were not recognized as valid qualifications. Still, in responding to COVID-19, the Vietnamese Government changed its stance on both issues. In February 2020, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) closed all higher education campuses but with the proviso that: "campuses can close, but learning must continue" (Nguyen & Pham, 2020).

Successful hospitality and tourism education necessitate internship experiences, but to deliver an internship experience through virtual channels presents special challenges. Also referred to as mediated internships (CMIs), these internships are further categorized by Bayerlein and Jeske (2018) as E-internships and Simulated Internships. The simulated internship is based in Higher Education Providers (HEPs) rather than with an employer such as a hotel. They provide structured learning experiences within an "immersive virtual environment that replicates a real-world setting" (p.31). The format rests on case-based instruction and provides experiences working in a team that are not normally available in a classroom but are limited by the authenticity of the simulated internship environment (Bayerlein, 2015).

The second form in which students do not physically join an employer in the hospitality industry is that of the E-internship. In this form, the placement of the intern is one in which the employer and intern are connected by the internet (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018). Although these experiences develop students' ability to communicate, build relationships and understand ideas and concepts relating to the work environment, they may also present technical challenges to some. The student must also have self-discipline and be able to motivate themselves without the presence of a teacher or supervisor or similar interaction. A highly motivated self-regulated learner has a much better chance of success, according to research (Artino & Stephens, 2009). When compared to a live classroom environment Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2004) have argued, "in a web-based learning environment, students must exercise a high degree of self-regulatory competence to accomplish their learning goals" (p. 40). Thus, skill is required in developing a rich online environment to attract and stimulate students.

The tools available vary according to the institution's wealth and expertise. Nguyen and Pham (2020) point to two groups of education providers: those with a learning management system (LMS), and those without. Once there is internet access, there are many tools available to support teaching across several platforms, live real-time video and two-way communication with students. Applications such as: Microsoft Teams, Skype, email, Adobe Connect, Zoom, and Google Hangouts, deliver synchronous and asynchronous communications as low-cost, yet rich and varied communication forms. Information is exchanged in three ways. First, between students; second, between lecturer and students; finally, and most importantly, between lecturer and online internship provider.

Some researchers argue that the employment of Web 2.0 technologies in blended learning environments enables a shift to collaboration. For example, Richardson et al. (2013) suggests that

collaboration or interaction between students and their peers, as well as between students and instructors, can be enhanced. Similarly, Kumar (2009) suggests that Web 2.0 tools enable a greater capacity for students to discuss course content, to communicate with others and thus enable learning to be a more creative process and indeed a more successful and enduring one.

Sadaf et al. (2012) and Kumar (2009) suggest that the use of Web 2.0 technologies can encourage a shift from content-centered learning to learner-centered learning, arguing for example that Web 2.0 technologies enable students to stay engaged in the learning process by producing and publishing work themselves. As well, Sadaf et al. (2012) comment that students can become co-creators of knowledge through the exchange of information and experience. Furthermore, students can also "have their say in deciding and getting what is most useful to them" (Kumar, 2009, p. 4), and thus have a more active role in their learning. Co-creation in a virtual internship context, enabled by enhanced learning technology, would enable students to develop creative abilities that future hospitality and tourism landscapes will need and to contribute to education providers' curricular makeovers (Bovill et al., 2016) mandated by transformed industry demands. Most critically, high-level interactive communication with virtual internship partners that brings interns into co-creative projects and activities are crucial for students to grow service-related capability and deliver value for hospitality and tourism employers.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY IN CAMBODIA, VIETNAM AND AUSTRALIA

Particularly in tourism-reliant countries where hotels depend on interns supplied by hospitality and tourism training institutions as talent pipelines, the industry disruption that COVID-19 has swiftly caused makes it crucial to address the viability of traditional internships in suddenly socially-distanced training environments. A brief outline of relevant factors currently at play in three such countries targeted for the project proposed in this paper follows.

Vietnam

Tri Le, director of the postgraduate training department at Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City – International University, said that documents legalizing online teaching did not exist before COVID-19 (Nguyen & Pham, 2020). Thus, online education has been seen only as part of a blended learning package to support face to face teaching. Nevertheless, Asian governments agree that information and communication technology (ICT) offers students access to the vast expanse of knowledge available throughout the world. Furthermore, to use this information wisely, students need to become actively critical information seekers and processors instead of just passive recipients (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2011). Accordingly, Vietnam invested in ICT and between 2002 and 2007 advanced 15 spots in the ICT Development Index.

COVID-19 has disrupted not only the industry but also the valuable aspects of practical training offered by the internship experience. Le (2017) pronounced the Vietnamese hospitality education field as one in its infancy and found that employers preferred vocational education and training graduates over university tourism graduates due to their more practical orientations. Le also found university graduates dissatisfied with internship programs, and more inclined to abandon the industry. This indicates that internships may form a critical 'initiation' into the industry. That perceived glamour of luxury work environments may get a reality check in internships where students experience the realities of demanding customer service, flexible shifts and comparatively low pay inherent to the field. Le (2017) also concluded that the preference for vocational education and training (VET) students was grounded in operational-based factors, indicating that internships in hospitality and tourism fulfil critical operational capacity and human resource functions, for resource-intensive hospitality and

tourism businesses in Vietnam. If COVID-19 related disruption continues, it may endanger the practical learning students experience through internships.

Australia

Decision making about COVID-19 is being made across federal and state government levels. The Federal Government's JobKeeper scheme compensates COVID-19 affected employers to pay specifically defined categories of regular staff \$750 per week for the scheme's six-month duration, due to end in September 2020 (Parliament of Australia, 2020). However, many young people aged 15-24 work in casual jobs in the hardest hit sectors of retail, hospitality and tourism and do not fit the JobKeeper criteria,. Geographically, Atkinson (2020) reported that young people living in major cities and inner suburbs, and regional areas that rely on tourism, including many already affected by prolonged drought, recent summer bushfires and floods, are at particular risk. Hospitality and tourism students are therefore doubly affected, as many study at institutions located in these areas, and also earn employment income in vulnerable, casual, hospitality and tourism occupations. If both hospitality and tourism employment and internship placements become scarce, not only will students miss out on experiential hospitality and tourism-relevant learning and earnings, they may consider switching disciplines. Prospective hospitality and tourism students may re-consider hospitality and tourism degrees, and apply for other degrees with more apparent employment prospects.

Tourism is Australia's fourth-largest export industry, accounting for 8.2 per cent of Australia's export earnings in 2018-19 and directly employing over 5% of Australia's workforce (Tourism Australia, 2020). International visitor numbers will undoubtedly drop in the foreseeable future, and increased domestic travel may mediate the economic damage to the industry somewhat if virus transmission containment measures are successful. An additional consideration in the Australian context is the importance of international education, its third-largest export industry. Many international students work in hospitality and tourism casual jobs or undertake internships during their stay in Australia. Employment and internships that offer local Australian practical experience are valued highly by these students (IEAA, 2020).

Currently there are 634 hospitality and tourism courses offered in Australia, at the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels that range from from vocational certification to postgraduate degrees. Although the number of program enrolments and program completions in vocational training packages has dropped considerably since 2018-19 (Australian Industry and Skills Committee, 2020) the industry faces skill shortages particularly in communication, virtual collaboration, social intelligence, resilience, stress tolerance, flexibility and problem solving. Top Universities (2020) reported that the interest in virtual internships is growing due to COVID-19; however, hospitality and tourism is not on their list of industry sectors offering them.

Cambodia

According to the President of the Cambodian Hotel Association, by April 2020 about 650,000 people who were employed as hotel staff, cooks, drivers, tour guides and travel agents were affected by COVID-19- (Sen, 2020). In April, the government announced its intention to assist minimum wage workers employed in the tourism sector with a payment of 20 percent of their minimum wages. They also mentioned extending the assistance to all those who are suspended from their jobs at hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and travel agencies (Sen, 2020). The monthly allowance of \$40 to affected employees is a similar initiative to what is offered to garment workers with the only difference being

that garment workers are properly registered. In contrast, most hospitality and tourism employees work without a regulated minimum wage (Yon, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has also largely restricted the ability of educational institutions to conduct in-person learning, searching for alternative ways. In Cambodia, COVID-19 has halted education. Transformation of higher education only began in the mid-1990s; the sudden need to "go digital" challenged not only teachers who were unprepared for online teaching but also students unfamiliar with technology and online platforms (Leng et al., 2020).

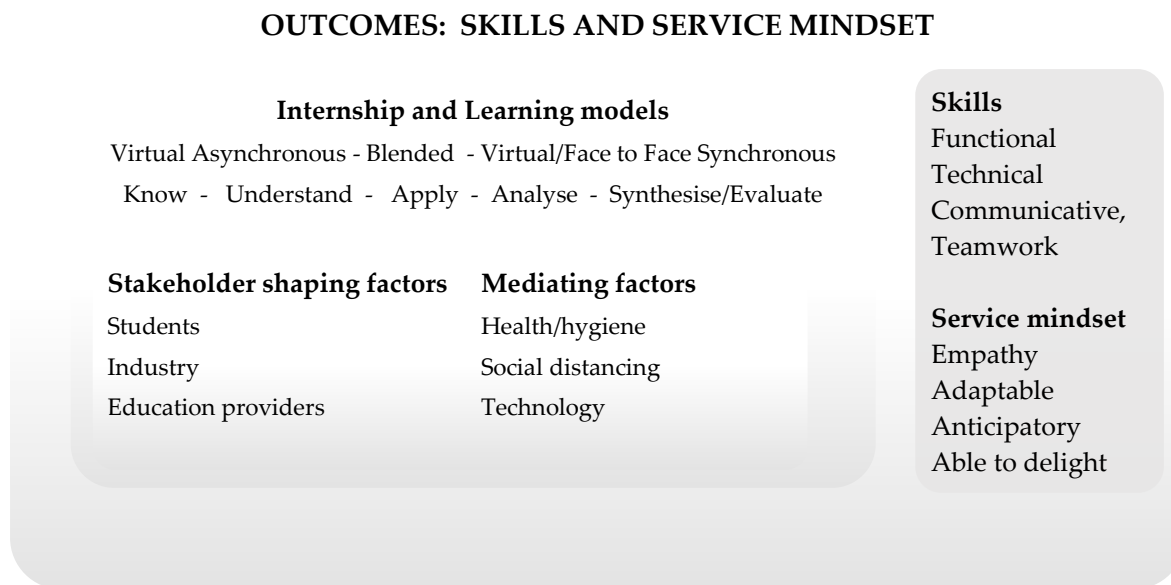
Despite the challenges, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) quickly found creative ways to promote learning outside the traditional school setting with the support of development partners (Chheang & Khut, 2020). Their collaboration with UNICEF resulted in the establishment of distance learning activities from early childhood through to primary, lower and upper secondary education (UNICEF Cambodia, 2020). Under the framework of UNESCO's Capacity Development for Education Programme (CapED), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) initiatives are being upgraded, including skills for employment, through digital learning platforms (UNESCO, 2020). With COVID-19 around for some time, the awareness and need for digital learning is increasing.

The next section introduces a conceptual framework. This proposes how factors relevant to various stakeholder contexts such as the ones outlined in the three above examples might be incorporated into research that investigates different learning and virtual internship models, and how they might effectively develop critical skills and service mindsets.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Hospitality and tourism researchers regularly stress the importance of consistent quality service that meet and exceed customer expectations (Abdelhamied, 2019). Consequently, soft skill competencies are deemed essential to hospitality and tourism education (Sisson & Adams, 2013) for students to understand, anticipate and exceed customer expectations. The conceptual framework introduced in Figure 1 incorporates the nature of hospitality and tourism as an ecosystem of service stakeholders. It proposes a representation of how desirable service mindsets can be developed through three models of internship practice. The framework identifies critical hospitality and tourism work-integrated learning stakeholder factors, then considers how various virtual internship and learning models effectively prepare hospitality and tourism graduates to deliver relevant skill outcomes. The model adopts the importance of the "service mindset" to the industry, particularly in transformed post-COVID-19 contexts, and challenges researchers to consider how essential elements of service mindsets are essential for post-COVID-19 service environments, and how they can be adequately developed in virtual internship models.

FIGURE 1: Virtual internship factors, models and service mindsets



This conceptual framework is proposed as a potential base on which to build research into virtual and online internships in five research areas.

Stakeholder Shaping Factors

The value that student, industry and education provider stakeholders share from internships and work-integrated learning activities is grounded in collaboration and mutual benefits (Patrick et al., 2008). The factors relevant to the individual and shared interests of these stakeholder groups, therefore, form essential research elements.

Mediating Factors

The framework integrates mediating factors due to COVID-19 that embody a swiftly transforming hospitality and tourism environment such as attention to and anticipation of health and hygiene, social distancing in workplaces and learning spaces, and increased use of technology for operations, teaching, and training. These have an impact on the WIL stakeholders mentioned above, but also more widely on hospitality and tourism customer markets.

Internship and Learning Models

Figure 1 integrates experiential pedagogical principles that necessitate reflective learning and active engagement over passive listening (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and embody a hierarchical yet iterative learning taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) into virtual or online learning environments that may be: asynchronous and consumptive (for example, watching a video); asynchronous and interactive (an interactive video); blended online and face to face (engaging in an online learning exercise before participating in a group training activity); and synchronous online (a Zoom session) or virtual activity where the learner influences the activity outcome. Dalgarno and Lee (2010) claimed that many 3-D Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) could not be "fully immersive nor provide a true 3-D experience" in an online education environment where each institution and student use common tools such as PCs, laptops,

tablets and smartphones. Therefore, although the learning benefits of VLE may be exciting developments on the horizon, this conceptual framework will be further deployed. In particular, the framework will be applied to investigate whether hospitality and tourism desired skills and service mindsets can be developed through the simple technologies already commonly available to students in the countries examined: Cambodia, Vietnam, and Australia.

Skill Outcomes

The skill outcomes in this framework are proposed in alignment with the internship and learning models within which they may be successfully developed. Students may learn functional, operational skills such as how to fold linen or set a table, especially if the materials or props are accessible in their homes or wherever they view the online resource, or if the resource is created to be interactive. Higher-level technical skills such as operating electrical or complex mechanical equipment may necessitate more extensive interactivity by the student, followed up by direct engagement with a trainer in a synchronous online or face to face, appropriately distanced setting. Communication, intercultural, interpersonal and teamwork through online Zoom meetings combined with online training could deliver high levels of learning while supporting the student to complete online work that delivers value for an internship partner.

Service Mindset

A service mindset is undefined in hospitality and tourism literature (Wirtavuori, 2018), yet the term is encountered in countless hotel review platforms, business trade publications, and the popular media. Fundamentally, the service mindset goes beyond process performance; employees with service mindsets work with passion and commitment to make each customer moment meaningful. Therefore, this conceptual framework posits a service mindset as one based on more than processes and procedures. A service mindset integrates personal effort, creativity, passion and commitment to making each customer encounter meaningful. Four service mindset components that hospitality and tourism employers will value in post-COVID-19 environments are proposed. First, empathy with customers (as well as other staff, suppliers, and other service providers) to understand their heightened concerns, uncertainty and expectations. Second, adaptability to effectively deal with unprecedented issues and problems in transformed hospitality and tourism working environments. Third, anticipation of what customers need and how they can fulfil expectations, and fourth, the ability to consistently and effectively act on this anticipation and delight customers.

The overall research questions that have arisen from the literature review and have been more specifically generated through the conceptual framework development above are discussed in the following section.

FUTURE RESEARCH – VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

This paper's review of hospitality and tourism internships indicate strong consensus around the value of practical, work-based training. Training is positively correlated with customer satisfaction and intention to return (Abdelhamied, 2019), and is seen as a positive influence in developing a well-rounded experience that promotes service-minded staff.

The paper proposes that in hotel and tourism organizations interns' experiences are limited by the nature of the organization they are placed with and their location within that organization. These factors restrict the range of experiences an intern is exposed to. For example, experiences such as calming a dissatisfied customer, or maximising customer satisfaction when faced with a variety of

choices. Virtual online vignettes have no such limitations on the variety of experiences presented to the intern. The online environment can move the intern through many situations they would only encounter in several years' working in, for example, a five-star hotel. Thus, the interns are made aware of and learn how to manage many more circumstances and how to respond with a service-minded approach. The airline industry uses this method of computer-generated simulations to train pilots how to respond in rarely encountered situations.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Simulated WIL, simulated learning and online WIL may be cheaper for organizations to provide per student and can save time, including travel and other expenses. However, there is a requirement for students to have access to a laptop, smartphone or PC, and reliable internet service. How can these needs be met in many poorer countries where a thriving tourist industry supports much employment?

The continuation of this paper's research study will explore the attitudes of hospitality and tourism employers and training organizations towards online and virtual internships, their propensity to provide some of this model of training to interns, and their potential satisfaction with the skill and service mindset outcomes that can result from online and virtual internships.

After securing ethics approval from the relevant institutions (currently in progress), a sample of hospitality and tourism and training organization professionals sourced from the investigator and LinkedIn networks in the three targeted countries will be approached. Patton (2002) described semi-structured interview approaches as suitable in evolving situations in order to gain rich insight into key participants' views. Therefore, the study will seek to answer the following broad questions through semi-structured interviews:

1. In the absence of authentic, on-site placement experiences, do virtual internship options provide hospitality and tourism students with opportunities to gain practical, location-independent experiences, establish greater digital literacy, and develop self-management skills?
2. Will virtual internships, simulated WIL, and simulated learning equip students with not only the practical skills but also advance students' service mindsets? Which attitudes and behaviours are critically important?
3. Can online internships, simulated WIL and simulated learning adequately prepare students to handle the wide-ranging, real-life situations that arise in complex hospitality and tourism contexts?
4. Will virtual substitutions for internships become part of the new normal?
5. What expectations would hotel employers and education providers have about virtual internships skills and service mindset development?
6. Technology continues to improve in capability while decreasing in cost. Could industry organisations and training providers use this growing effectiveness as leverage to progressively replace face to face internships entirely with virtual experiences?
7. What will be the skills required in the future post-COVID-19? Can they be developed remotely?
8. Is there a perceived need in the hospitality and tourism industry for interns who are more aware of technology as increased digital technology is incorporated into hospitality and tourism operations (e.g., hotels)? How can internships and especially online internships meet this additional training need?
9. What is the level of industry confidence in such technologies?

These and other questions will be studied in the next phase of research to elucidate the impact of COVID-19 on rethinking the design and provision of internships by delivering virtual experiences online. The response to COVID-19 promises to affect the hospitality and tourism industry for years, limiting the size, income and forcing changes to interactions between employees with each other and with customers. As outlined in this paper and projected in its conceptual framework, authentic training experiences will also be significantly modified. This study and future research conducted by others in the field will explore and clarify some of these matters.

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