

## Conference Paper

# Entrepreneurial Learning Acquired Through Internships in the Hospitality Industry

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how internships develop and enhance the entrepreneurial spirit of university students. A questionnaire was designed and issued twice, that is, before and after the students' internships. An independent-sample *t*-test analysis was used to compare mean scores before and after the internship. The results show that internships provide students with more confidence to identify opportunities and solve problems, enhance interpersonal and communication skills, and render interns more action-oriented. The study also reveals that students lack certain key abilities. Overall, the study provides information for both students and university teachers concerning the importance of internships.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurial learning, hospitality industry, multi-skills

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## 1. Introduction

The development and stimulation of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education have been goals of governments in many countries during the past decade (Ruskovaara and Pihkala, 2015). During this period, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has also been trying to encourage young people to become more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial. Therefore, the government constantly encourages universities to offer innovation and entrepreneurship courses to enhance students' entrepreneurial spirit. In this way, the government hopes that students will cultivate their entrepreneurial spirit while on campus. The number of entrepreneurial courses offered by Taiwanese universities has accordingly increased substantially to meet these requirements.

Entrepreneurship is vital to strengthen the competitiveness, growth and innovation of a country (Ruskovaara and Pihkala, 2015). It plays very important roles in accelerating economic development by driving innovation and enhancing the competitiveness

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of products or companies (Schumpeter, 1934; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Han-non (2005) also suggests that higher education is critical for developing graduates' motivation and ability to actively participate in entrepreneurial activities. Although it is unclear if entrepreneurship can be taught or learned on campus (Haase and Lautenschlager, 2011), an action-oriented teaching method pertaining to entrepreneurship has been considered method to establish entrepreneurship in students (Asvoll and Jacobsen, 2012; Neck and Greene 2011; Waltera and Dohse, 2012). Previous studies have noted that action-based entrepreneurship training or study are particularly effective at enhancing students' entrepreneurial spirit and activities (Gielnik et al., 2015).

Moreover, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan recently proposed a series of methods to bridge the gap between university graduates' abilities and the requirements of industry. One such method is *learning-by-doing*, which is among the most important features of action-based learning (Frese et al., 2003). The best way to achieve learning-by-doing is through active experiences or internships (Beggs et al., 2008; Pittaway et al., 2015). Such approaches, which are foci of the action-oriented teaching method, are widely practiced by universities. The purpose of this study is to explore how students' internship experiences develop or enhance their entrepreneurial spirit. Accordingly, the study identifies the benefits conferred, and abilities accrued, via internships and explore how the experience enhances students' entrepreneurial spirit. Learning via internships is a form of entrepreneurial learning. The study also reviews the literature on internships and entrepreneurial learning, and how they contribute to entrepreneurial spirit. In particular, the experiential aspect of internship is considered, with respect to the provision of opportunities for students to enrich their entrepreneurial spirit.

According to the Ministry of Education, there are about 2,700 departments in Taiwan. Different departments have different approaches with respect to talent cultivation, and different vocations have variable manpower needs at the technical level. This study concentrates only on the relationship between internships and entrepreneurial spirit for hospitality-related industries. Taiwanese industry has grown rapidly in recent years; the number of inbound tourists has increased from about 2 to 10 million since 2003 (Tourism Bureau, R.O.C. 2013), which has produced a huge demand for qualified employees (Chang et al. 2012). As a result, many universities have established departments to nurture talent in hospital industry sectors, such as leisure, travel, hotels, recreation, and food and beverage services. More than 95% of such departments offer planned compulsory or elective internships. Many research also suggested that

experiential learning and fieldwork experience are critical in hospitality's curriculum (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006).

Therefore, it can be argued that these departments are the most in need of internships. However, few studies have discussed the impact of internships on entrepreneurial learning, especially for the hospitality industry. This study, therefore, concentrates on the impact of student internships on the hospitality industry, with additional consideration of entrepreneurial learning and spirit in the context of this industry. Although this is not the first study to discuss the importance of internships to students, it is the study to show that internships are beneficial to entrepreneurial learning, and to explore whether they enhance students' entrepreneurial spirit.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Hospitality industry

The concept of hospitality is not new. Although the hospitality industry creates many career opportunities and offers a means for economic development in many countries, Middleton (1983, p. 51) stated that "there is a definitional problem from the term hospitality industry". Indeed, it is very difficult to provide a clear definition of the word "hospitality", and this may be influenced by cultural variations. For example, the term hospitality first referred to hotels and catering in the United Kingdom, and then focused on food services and lodgings in the United States (Brotherton, 1999). Jones (1996, p. 6) suggested that "there is certainly no commonly shared paradigm of what we mean by hospitality". Hospitality has been defined as "the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers", "the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way" and "kindness in welcoming strangers or guests" ([www.collinsdictionary.com](http://www.collinsdictionary.com)).

The interpretation of hospitality can change over time and according to the situation. For example, Pfeifer (1983, p. 191) proposed a definition from a supply-side economics perspective, i.e., that "hospitality consists of offering food, beverage and lodging, or, in other words, of offering the basic needs for the person away from home". On the other hand, Cassee (1983, p. xiv) suggested that hospitality goes far beyond the classical concept of providing bed and food, and proposed a relatively holistic definition of hospitality, i.e., "a harmonious mixture of tangible and intangible components – food, beverages, beds, ambience and environment, and behavior of staff". Overall, hospitality consists of two components: human interaction and an exchange process

(King, 1995). Consequently, it can be argued that hospitality encompasses altruistic giving, the welcoming toward strangers, and provision of a sense of safety and security (Lee-Ross and Lashley, 2009)

## 2.2. Role of internships

Internships have a long history in higher education (Beggs et al., 2008). The importance of internships is unquestionable. Generally, internships can be thought of as autonomous or voluntary schemes engaged in by students who want to develop their personal capabilities to further their careers, enhance or meet the requirements of the workplace, or enrich their personal learning. Moreover, internships solve many problems for both companies and students, such as recruiting and attracting new recruits, and even the retention of future employees. Internships can also be seen as experiential learning processes that provide an opportunity for students to experience industries before graduating from school. Extant studies have even suggested that universities and industry should work together to create internship programs that are effective and beneficial for students (Doniņa, 2015). Internships provide students with opportunities to observe and evaluate the actual work environment, and to explore their suitability for a particular job (Beggs et al., 2008). One clear benefit of internships is that they provide students with a means of exploring their chosen career path.

However, there is a concern that higher education emphasizes theoretical knowledge, while largely ignoring practical skills and practice (Chen et al., 2011). For example, Wang (2002) posited that university students have difficulty coping with workplace pressures. An internship can provide an opportunity for students to obtain training both in an academic environment and under practical supervision. Internships also close the gap between college-obtained theory and practical work (Fox, 2001).

## 2.3. Entrepreneurial learning and internship

Garavan and O'Connell (1994) suggested that the three major characteristics of entrepreneurs are knowledge, skills and attitude. Internships also encompass these characteristics (their particular benefits are reviewed above). Furthermore, Henry et al. (2005) proposed that entrepreneurs require three distinct skills, which can distinguish between entrepreneurs and managers: technical, business management and

entrepreneurial skills. Technical skills pertain to communication and include oral, written and organizational skills. Business management skills include planning, decision-making, accounting and marketing management. Personal skills include innovation, risk-taking and persistence (Henry et.al, 2005). Previous studies have shown that these three broad skills can be acquired through effective entrepreneurial education. For example, Rae (2006, p.16) defined entrepreneurial learning as “learning to recognize and act on opportunities through initiating, organizing and managing ventures in social and behavioral ways”. On this basis, effective entrepreneurial learning can be achieved through action-oriented methods.

Typically, entrepreneurs are action-oriented people. Extant research indicates that an action-based learning method is beneficial for entrepreneurship (Gielnik et al., 2015). Internships, which can be considered a means of “learning-by-doing” in a real workplace environment, have a long heritage in entrepreneurial learning (Pittaway et al., 2015). Indeed, entrepreneurial learning considers reflection ability as important (Pittaway et al., 2015). Although internships may not lead students to start new ventures, they could strengthen their entrepreneurial spirit.

#### 2.4. Internship in the hospitality industry

Finding talent is a serious concern in the tourism and hospitality industries (Blomme et al., 2009). Fortunately, the internship system can address this problem. A well-trained university graduate from the departments of tourism and hospitality generally will have attained high-levels learning and skills (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006). Practical experience outside of the campus environment can play a very important role in converting a student into a qualified staff member (Kok, 2000).

Tourism and hospitality educators have clearly identified the merits of student internships. For example, they believe that practical experience in the real world helps students to learn more about their industry, and also provides a good opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and achieve a “balance between vocational and theoretical content” (Airey and Tribe, 2005). However, the internship may prove disastrous in some cases. For instance, a poor internship experience may lead a student to question his involvement in the industry in question and may lead to an early leave the industry (Fox, 2001). Brown et al. (2014) also noted that tourism and hospitality graduates often avoid staying in related industries and are more likely to find jobs in other sectors. Furthermore, Kuslivan and Kuslivan (2000) noted weak commitment to undergraduate students by the tourism and hospitality industries.

The tourism and hospitality industries clearly face a major challenge: nearly half of all students and employees choose to leave after having actually worked in them. Nevertheless, internships provide students with an opportunity to better understand an industry, and also facilitate the action-based and learning-by-doing educational processes.

### 3. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to explore the impact of internships on students' entrepreneurial spirit. At the same time, we also hope to clarify how the internship experience helps students establish this entrepreneurial spirit. We employed the survey research method: an instrument was designed based on those of Pittaway et al. (2015) and Beggs et al. (2008). The former researchers demonstrated that entrepreneurial learning involves "opportunities", "problem solving", "experience gained", "action orientation", "learning from mistakes", "reflection on experience", "uncertainty" and "ambiguity". This is very similar to the perspective whereby entrepreneurial learning encompasses "action-orientation and experience", "learning from mistakes, crises and failure", "reflection on experience", "opportunities and problem solving", "uncertainty, ambiguity and emotional exposure", "social practice and social engagement" and "self-efficacy and intentionality" (Pittaway et al., 2011; Pittaway and Cope, 2007). Our study explores whether university students can enhance their entrepreneurial spirit, rather than on business creation. Thus, "uncertainty", "ambiguity" and "self-efficacy and intentionality" are not relevant in the present context. Moreover, our study also explores the multi-level skills discussed by Beggs et al. (2008), i.e., it examines whether an internship program can develop or enhance such skills, which also correspond to the three distinctive skills that are required by an entrepreneur according to Henry et al. (2005). The questionnaire indexed opportunities, problem solving, experience gained, action orientation, learning from mistakes, reflection on experience, and multi-skills. These measures were used to examine the difference in entrepreneurial spirit among the experimental groups, before versus after the internship.

#### 3.1. Procedure, samples and data analysis

The questionnaire was issued twice: before and after the internship. We distributed 310 questionnaires to Year Three and Four undergraduate students who were studying

full-time at a business or hospitality school at two universities in Taiwan. All of the students who initially completed the questionnaire enrolled in internship programs within hospitality-related industries. Only 148 questionnaires were completed after the internship period, which ranged from 2 to 6 months. Among these, 54 (36.5%) were from males and 94 (63.5%) from females. The proportion of respondents in Year Four (64.2%) was higher than that in Year Three (35.8%). In all, 67.5% of the respondents were studying at catering- or tourism-related departments. Of these, 42.6 and 37.8% could be subclassified into hotels and catering, followed by other categories such as clubs, chain-stores and the tourism industry. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: The general background of participants.

Gender/Year	Male	Female	Year 3	Year 4
	54 (36.5%)	94 (63.5%)	53	95
Departments	Catering related	Tourism related	Leisure related	Management
	44 (29.7%)	56 (37.8%)	32 (21.6%)	16 (10.8%)
Locations	Catering	Hotels	Tourism industry	others
	56 (37.8%)	63 (42.6%)	14 (9.5%)	15 (10.1%)

The Cronbach’s alpha value for the study instrument was 0.91 before the internship and 0.83 after the internship; this indicates high reliability. An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the before- and after-internship data (Table 2). Twelve questionnaire items showed significantly different scores before- versus after-internship, in the expected direction. A difference in means (eta squared) greater than 0.14 corresponds to a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). Four skills, i.e., marketing, programming, supervision and computing, had difference between the before- versus after-internship scores was in the opposite direction to that expected.

## 4. Discussion

This study examined the impact of the internship experience on students’ learning and entrepreneurial spirit. The results have important implications for students and university hospitality education. Figure 1 provides a schematic of the internship experience.

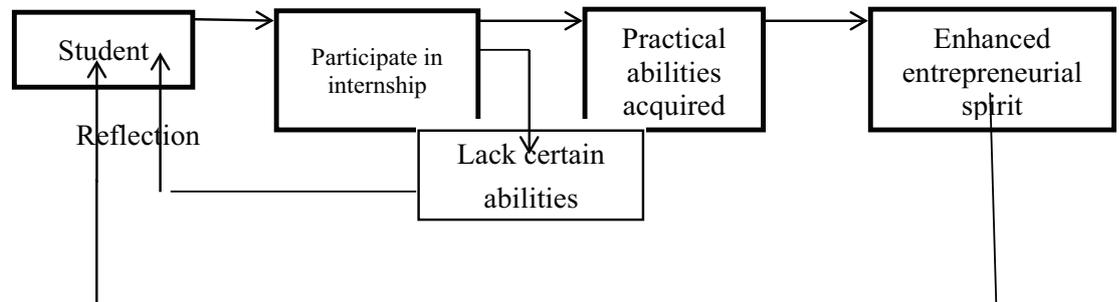
The solid line in Figure 1 indicates how internships can enhance students’ entrepreneurial spirit. As expected, once a student completes their internship, they believe that their interpersonal and communication skills have been improved. Second, internships can help students develop themselves with respect to identifying opportunities, problem solving and action orientation. However, as indicated by the dashed

TABLE 2: The internship experience questionnaire used in this study.

☒	Before internship		After internship		t-value	eta squared
	M	SD	M	SD		
<b>Opportunities</b>						
1. If I had a chance, I would put my thoughts into practice.	4.27	0.73	4.49	0.57	-2.86*	0.03
2. I know where to find new ideas and opportunities.	3.62	0.83	4.26	0.60	-7.64**	0.17
<b>Problem-solving</b>						
1. I have the ability to solve problems.	3.88	0.63	4.38	0.60	-7.01*	0.14
2. I know that solving problems helps me learn.	4.23	0.67	4.62	0.53	-5.59*	0.10
<b>Experience gained</b>						
1. I am starting to have new ideas more often.	3.72	0.74	4.28	0.63	-7.05	
2. I've improved my willingness to take part and do things.	3.95	0.77	4.43	0.66	-5.81	
<b>Action orientation</b>						
1. I am a proactive person.	3.65	0.75	4.33	0.60	-8.68*	0.20
2. I am better at doing new things.	3.90	0.69	4.41	0.64	-6.58*	0.13
<b>Learning from mistakes</b>						
1. I've learnt from mistakes.	4.14	0.60	4.56	0.54	-6.42	
2. I've found that the mistakes I've made have helped me learn new things.	4.31	0.68	4.81	0.43	-7.59**	0.16
<b>Reflection on experience</b>						
1. In order for us to progress, I have needed to reflect on my personal skills.	4.21	0.61	4.47	0.55	-3.90	
2. Because I've been involved in doing things, I've been forced to reflect more.	3.88	0.71	4.59	0.53	-9.75*	0.24
<b>Multi-skills</b>						
1. I have good communication skills.	3.72	0.76	4.26	0.59	-6.88*	0.14
2. I have good human relationship skills.	3.68	0.74	4.12	0.65	-5.52*	0.09
3. I have good marketing skills.	3.20	0.73	3.49	0.71	-3.50	
4. I have good programming skills.	3.21	0.78	3.14	0.73	0.85	
5. I have good supervisory skills.	3.43	0.74	3.21	0.65	2.75**	0.03
6. I have good computer skills.	3.43	0.83	3.37	0.72	0.60	
7. I do a good job taking initiative.	4.17	0.64	4.59	0.57	-5.93	
8. I am highly motivated.	3.88	0.71	4.45	0.54	-7.85	
9. I am ready for work after graduation.	3.49	0.97	3.92	0.68	-4.47**	0.06
10. I act as a professional.	3.77	0.80	4.10	0.67	-3.87**	0.05

Note: \*p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01

line in Figure 1, the students reported inadequate learning of practical skills before beginning their internships, specifically programming, computing and, especially, supervisory skills. Nevertheless, through reflection the students could recognize these



**Figure 1:** Schematic of the student internship experience.

deficiencies during their internships. This suggests that university teachers should carefully consider how to ensure that students cultivate these skills while on campus.

#### 4.1. Recommendation for students

Internships enable students to verify theory obtained in the classroom and enhance their interpersonal and communication skills. The results of this study indicate that internships can help students learn from their mistakes and identify opportunities for improvement, thereby in turn helping them to perceive their future in the workplace. Internships help students to identify the types of skills that need to be improved upon before graduating and entering the workforce. This study strongly suggests that students should participate in internships before graduating. Furthermore, for any student whose future lies in hospitality-related industries, it is recommended that they participate in an internship, because doing so will facilitate success in their selected field.

#### 4.2. Recommendation for university teachers

Our survey revealed that many students had insufficient training in programming, supervision and computing before beginning their internships. Thus, this study also suggests that university teachers should encourage students to participate in internships before graduating to better understand the workplace. Universities and teachers should reflect on why students who have been studying on campus for 2–3 years still lack these abilities. To help students adapt to their future roles in the workplace, the gap between what is learned in classes and what is needed for the workplace must be narrowed; both universities and teachers have a responsibility to ensure

that students have the skills required to thrive in the workplace. Moreover, university teachers should also consider the type of hospitality-related industries or companies that can best enhance students' entrepreneurial learning.

## 5. Conclusions

Beggs et al. (2008) noted that the internship experience is critical for successful transition from the school environment to the workplace. The main finding of this study is that an internship in the hospitality industry provides the specific skills required in the workplace, and also enhances students' reflection abilities. We found a difference in entrepreneurial spirit before versus after the internships. Reflection enables students to identify the practical abilities and skills that require strengthening while at university, before entering the workforce. This study illustrates and confirms the benefits of internships in terms of nurturing students' entrepreneurial abilities. Internships represent a good means for students to learn, reflect and better understand themselves.

## 6. Limitations and Further Research

This study focused on students' internship experiences within hospitality-related industries. The main limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size. Many of the respondents to the initial survey could not be located after their internships, or did not want to complete the questionnaire again; this was attributed to the long duration of the research. Consequently, the response rate and number of samples were suboptimal. This study also only focused on students of business and hospitality; further research should consider students from other colleges who are participating in internships in different industries.

Although the study revealed that the internship experience provides students with a deeper understanding of their future career and enhances their entrepreneurial spirit, future research should explore industry retention rates; a large number of students who enter hospitality-related industries leave after a short while. Furthermore, using qualitative interviews in addition to a quantitative survey may be beneficial for future research, by allowing changes (before versus after the internship) to be compared, and the causes of any such changes to be more precisely identified. An interview might allow for greater understanding of the student perspective regarding internships.

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