

# The development of soft skills during internships: The hospitality student's voice

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This paper considers the value of industrial placements in providing an opportunity for hospitality students to develop soft skills in the workplace in addition to the technical skills learned at their educational establishments. While there are concepts such as “problem-based learning” which help students to think across subject silos, this paper argues that internships offer a valuable opportunity for students to learn and for industry to promote their organisations to prospective employees. Using a year's worth of student workplace diaries, the researchers identify that, in addition to hard skills, students learn communication skills, professionalism, teamwork and personal development. The paper concludes by suggesting that this exploratory analysis of student diaries demonstrates the importance of internships, but that more could be done to increase their value and to make the industry attractive to prospective employees. Opportunities for further research include more gathering and analysis of these documents which give voice to the lived experience of hospitality students on placement.

**Keywords:** international student, internship, New Zealand, placement, reflection, soft skills, work integrated learning

## Introduction

In the early 1990s, Leslie (1991) documented the challenges faced by the hospitality industry. Key among these was the anticipated decrease in young people available to come into the industry at the same time as the hospitality industry was due to expand significantly. He argued that the industrial placement element of hospitality courses was a significant opportunity for student, educational establishment and industry partner to come together, but that the “lack of definitive work practices, comprehensive personnel policies, and trade unions” made it important for a discussion to take place on the format and benefits of industrial placements in the hospitality industry (Leslie, 1991, p. 66). The value and challenges of work placements, internships or work integrated learning has therefore long been debated in the field of hospitality management education. Closely connected to this has been the debate about how students of hospitality develop “soft” and “hard” skills (Lashley, 2009; Lashley & Barron, 2006; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Weber, Finley, Crawford & Rivera, 2009). Hospitality students also benefit from exposure to “problem-based learning” approaches to assessment, as this most closely mirrors the multi-disciplinary challenges they will face in industry (Kivela & Kivela, 2005). This paper focuses on the transferable “soft skills” acquisition of hospitality students on placement from a private tertiary educational provider in Auckland, New Zealand. After a comprehensive literature review identifying what is already known on the topic of the acquisition of employability and soft skills by hospitality students, it reviews a year's worth of student internship diaries/ weekly reflexive logs (internship experiences in their own

words) to see what transferable skills are learned and utilised to increase the hospitality graduate's future employability.

## Soft skills development, placements and reflection

Baum (1990) repeated a study originally done in the USA to identify the competencies required of hospitality graduates by the industry. He used three categories (essential; considerable importance; moderately important) and found “both studies identify what might be described as ‘soft’ or human relations associated competencies as the most significant within the top-rated group” (Baum, 1990, p. 14). They included items such as “guest care”, “employee relations”, “professionalism” and “communication” skills. He explains this by the claim that technical skills can be taught through in-house training, whereas soft skills take much longer to acquire. Weber et al. (2009) agree that research into this aspect of the industry has been done since the 1980s. Lashley (2009, p. 340) sounds a warning note that “the assumption that employers are looking for hard skills in employees is also questionable”. Instead, he found that employers were not concerned about finding “pre-skilled workers”, but instead concentrated on recruiting “nice” staff.

Sisson and Adams (2013) did research into the competencies required for managers in accommodation, food and beverage, and meetings and events – no less than 86 per cent of the identified competencies were “soft skills” rather than “hard” technical skills. They describe hard skills as being “task oriented competencies” which are learned in the classroom, but claim that soft skills are learned by interacting with customers and colleagues, as is the case during internships or placements.

With the development of skills such as critical thinking, staff management and strategic thinking, Sisson and Adams (2013, p. 137) argue “the need for technical industry expertise is decreasing while the need for non-industry-specific knowledge is increasing”. They do, however, warn that technical skills may well get graduates their first job, but the longer they work in the industry, the more important soft skills will become. This is a similar point to that made by Jack, Stansbie and Sciarini (2017, p. 17) who warn that “while most graduates are adequately prepared in regard to job knowledge, many are lacking necessary job skills”. They suggest that too much of education is focused on the attainment of knowledge.

Warhurst and Nickson (2007) argue that “soft skills” jobs need to support “thinking skills” in the “knowledge economy”, requiring both emotional labour and aesthetic labour from staff. They suggest that emotional labour has become an essential soft skill for front-line hospitality staff because of the amount of social interaction customer-facing staff are expected to engage in, and because they are themselves part of the product that is being offered for sale. They conclude their study by saying they found “for much retail and hospitality work, ‘hard’, technical skills are likely to be much less important than soft skills” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, p. 114). Soft skills training noted by people in their study included dress sense, body language, make-up/grooming, and scripting. Weber et al. (2009) propose four categories of soft skills: leadership/people skills; communication; management and organisation; cognitive skills/knowledge; and argue that soft skills are essential in order for an organisation to have good relationships with employees and customers. In their study they found the most important competencies to be “working effectively with employees and customers, setting a positive example, displaying honesty/commitment and developing creative solutions to problems” (Weber et al., 2009, p. 359). Sisson and Adams (2013, p. 140) agree, saying that

[t]hese findings support those of most other studies, indicating that the competencies that are most essential for managers to be successful in hospitality are soft ones. The two most essential soft competencies in this study were developing positive customer relations and working effectively with peers. It is apparent from these findings that hospitality programmes today must produce students who understand interpersonal relationships and can work well with both guests and peers.

Having established the importance of soft skills for graduates to be successful in the hospitality industry, it is helpful to consider the benefits those skills might provide while the student is on placement (i.e. before they join the industry full-time).

Placements are extremely valuable. Leslie (1991) summarises them into benefits for the students themselves (awareness of the scope and diversity of the industry; personal development and developing independence; communication skills; applying theory to practice; building evidence of suitability for employment in the sector), benefits for the industry (enthusiastic employees; fresh perspectives; additional resources at busy times; useful research project findings; trial period for future employees), and benefits for educational establishments (sharing current industry practice with

lecturing staff; closer relationships between industry and academia; students can use real-world experiences in class and assessments when they return). Jack et al. (2017, p. 18) suggest placements mean hospitality students “learn to work with multitudes of people, personality types, and deal with issues on the ‘human’ side of the business”. Apart from developing the ability to interact with others, it is also claimed that internships develop the use of initiative, punctuality, self-confidence and improve social skills, or as some have called them, just good work habits. Sometimes these skills are difficult to learn in a classroom situation. They quote statistics that suggest 58 per cent of students end up hired as full-time employees in the organisation where they did their internship – this is a great incentive for employers to offer internships. Tse (2010) claims placements give students real-world experience and allow them to see how the theories they learned are applied. It also allows them to reflect on their future career choices. However, Solnet, Robinson and Cooper (2007, p. 67) warn that the focus of many educational establishments’ internship programmes is on “a quantitative requirement of hours, but with no qualitative consideration of the standard of the experience in industry” where the student may be given a series of low-level tasks to complete, and although that was the situation a decade ago, it is something institutions should still guard against.

While Leslie (1991) makes a number of recommendations for improving the value and effectiveness of placements, the focus is on making them more useful to industry, not on the personal and professional skills (referred to as “soft skills” in this paper) that a student may develop on their placements in industry. An essential skill for students to develop lifelong learning is the ability to reflect on their experiences in industry. Jack et al. (2017, p. 19) claim that in the workplace students are forced to make decisions, but then “mull the results of the action and reapply it to a new situation”. This skill that is often claimed for graduates – the ability to reflect on experiences, both positive and negative, and to learn from them – (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Morrison, 1996) will now be discussed. This is essential if graduates are to develop lifelong learning skills (Lashley, 1999). Lashley makes the point that research points to hospitality students displaying a preference for learning from real-life or simulated situations, and avoiding scenarios requiring reflection or theorising. This ability to reflect and see connections between particular “chunks of knowledge” (Lashley, 1999, p. 181) is, however, crucial if a student is to learn from real-life situations such as those experienced during a placement or internship. These students should be able to use actual situations to develop into “reflective practitioners”, who not only have the technical skills required to do a particular task, but can also reflect on how that task could be done better (Cottrell, 2003; Tynjälä, Välimaa & Boulton-Lewis, 2006). Lashley argues that this ability to make connections “helps students to develop a good range of business related communication skills” (Lashley, 1999, p. 183), and that their group-work skills are also improved. Jack et al. (2017) also claim that the ability to reflect on experiences leads to greater job satisfaction, and that in turn may lead to a graduate staying in the hospitality industry instead of leaving.

## Research method

This study collected a year's worth of student workplace diaries from students on three-month (240 hours) work placements in establishments across New Zealand. This approach has been used by Tse (2010), although that study focused on the student view of the importance of internships, not the development of soft skills. Students in this study were required to complete and submit weekly online reflective pieces as part of their placements. Each submission was commented on by the industry tutor each week, with the aim of gradually moving students to a more mature and measured reflection demonstrating deep learning rather than merely descriptive pieces. At the end of the semester students submitted their assessments and they were marked. Students were not specifically told to focus on the development of soft skills and therefore any references to them were unprompted.

Once the assessments had been marked and feedback given, students were told about the research project and asked for permission to use their anonymised reflections for academic research in line with the ethics approval granted to the research team. Any student who chose not to return a signed ethics approval form had their reflections removed from the sample. Once this had been done, the diaries were allocated a number and all identifying characteristics removed by someone who was not part of the research team. A total of 65 anonymised student diaries were therefore available for analysis and these provided the basis for this paper.

Lin, Kim, Qiu and Ren (2017) were interested in experiential learning and what they called "service-learning" and used this approach. Many of the skills identified in their study were also soft skills. The diary entries were analysed for evidence of soft skills development and these were grouped into categories supported by quotes from the diaries. Several of the authors reviewed each entry to ensure a level of inter-coder reliability. The results are reported in the next section.

## Results

The following reports the soft skill-related comments made (unprompted) by students in their internship work diaries. The relevant entries have been grouped into categories linked back to the literature review.

### Hard skills

Students certainly noted technical skills, usually around making coffee, using machinery, ICT, folding napkins, making and serving drinks, or using chemicals correctly. Often these technical skills were taught to them by fellow workers rather than through any structured induction or training. While technical "hard skills" acquisition is not the focus of this paper, it is perhaps helpful to note them in order to give a fuller picture of the student placement experience, particularly as some of these comments also have implications for soft skills development.

*Having been here for three days, I have got the general feel of how the restaurant operates; I can now take orders; my co-workers have taught me how to operate the PoS (Point of Sales system); I now know where things are; I can manage the bar and make coffees as well; the work is not hard at all as it is quite similar*

*to my part-time work; it was quite inconvenient work-flow as the bar and restaurant are separated; Housekeeping is hard work so I had a sore back until the supervisor showed me how to work with a straight back as much as possible; I felt if I had my own housekeeping trolley I could work faster instead of having to share one.*

### Unexpected learning

In many cases students learnt things that they were not expecting to learn. This was commented on regularly enough to warrant a separate category in the analysis. The reflections certainly demonstrate an understanding that there is a lot more to the hospitality industry than they previously realised.

*Coming home a random man deliberately elbowed me in the street, which caused a huge bruise on my arm – this is when I realised that I should not be complacent at night and 10pm is still the latest I can work as it gets crazy out there; I was warned that one supervisor tends to bully new staff; I noticed that I do not have the social life I used to before this internship; the turnover rate of staff in the kitchen is crazy – in three weeks since we opened we lost two chefs and one sous-chef; I have made friends from doing my shifts here; I notice that as employees tire, it is inevitable that service quality is compromised; we had a food tasting for the new menu and the food was amazing – it was a new experience for me to have delicious food and talk about it with other staff; polishing dishes was very hard – after two hours my hands were very sore; I was working with a girl who is not easy to get on with but I managed it and the supervisor thanked me; I realised that housekeeping is really hard work.*

### Communication skills

This category was for comments related to interactions between staff or with customers. Given the regular criticisms of consumer-generated content forums such as TripAdvisor, it was noticeable how much students valued feedback from complete strangers or from their supervisors and peers, although this section also demonstrated some frustration with management not solving relatively straightforward issues with easy solutions.

*I would make a sign at the buffet table for the Chinese guests as it would make it easier for the guests and staff; it is important to communicate between staff to give guests good moments of truth; one of the front office staff said I had got a good review from a customer and that they would email it to me – I am waiting for it; I have noticed chefs swear a lot – I am lucky to work with people who are kind and friendly; my supervisor asked me what my biggest weakness was and I said "my English" – he said he would help me; my peers make work easier and fun; I work as the face and heart of the hotel in Reception; I am very lucky to have colleagues who encourage me; there was a banquet with Chinese people from Shaoxing who did not speak English but my manager did not ask me to work at it – managers should know the abilities of their staff and allocate them properly.*

### Professionalism

Students saw examples of professionalism and staff and management “going the extra mile” for customers and colleagues. In some cases it was something they had done themselves and which came from training at hotel school or from a personal philosophy of hospitableness, but in other cases they saw it demonstrated by their supervisors and noted in their diaries as something to aspire to. They were clearly also very appreciative of being singled out by managers or supervisors when they did something right – in some cases above their full-time peers. Situations where management “rolled up their sleeves” and “got on with it” also had a major impact on interns.

*I had to delay taking my break because I had to stay a bit longer and pay attention to each guest; I was flattered when the chef pointed to me and said “I would rather choose her to work here than the other girl”; when we had a problem our supervisor stepped up and washed dishes herself – I think that was admirable; one of the customers left a good comment about me and the manager told us at the 5pm meeting; sometimes when I take orders guests make a joke and I do not understand it so I just laugh. I would like to get closer and communicate with my guests properly so I can give them a more enjoyable time; I need to reprioritise and improve things; I needed a little help with my section but not as much as before; it was not too busy so I managed by myself and made no mistakes – I felt so proud of myself; my supervisor was impressed with my work; the supervisor said at the briefing that she appreciated my hard work from the previous day (I hope they ask me to continue working for them); front desk has to be really responsible as we hold confidential guest information, especially for celebrities; night audit have to be better multi-taskers than other front desk workers; I was supposed to finish at 10pm but the night auditor called in sick so I finished at 4am; I am very proud of my work and my supervisor is very proud of her trainee!!!; I felt really bad about mistakes in my room and I now realise that you have to pay 100% attention otherwise it is very easy to make mistakes; I felt rewarded that a customer told me “the coffee was fantastic” – I felt very proud of myself; last Sunday I folded 500 napkins and the supervisor asked me to teach all the staff – even the supervisors; the manager praised me and I felt a glow of pride.*

### Teamwork

Something that all students would have covered in their course would have been the importance of teamwork. However, seeing it actually happen in front of their eyes came as a surprise to many – seeing that people were doing things for the greater good sometimes seemed to come as a shock to them.

*Once we had finished we were asked to help colleagues who still had rooms left to clean; when I still had two rooms to clean my manager asked others to come and help me; they had a lunch for me on my last day and I had to give a speech about the people who had supported me; guests always come to reception and ask me questions as I am the only Japanese*

*speaker at my hotel so other colleagues have to do my job – we need to hire more Japanese speakers; when there is anything I don’t know I ask the supervisor and other staff for help and they always like to help me.*

### Personal development

This category is for when students noted experiences that had changed them as a person. These were often things that they felt strongly about and things which motivated them to put in the extra effort. These students were looking towards their next goal. Recognition by people they respected was also important.

*I think what I learned from this internship is confidence; I am just trying to get accustomed to new surroundings and try to do my best to fit in and work with new people; I wonder what I will learn next week; it was fun to do room service and see around the hotel; it was exciting to learn something new; while I was polishing glasses I was observing what the bartender was doing – I would like to learn bar work as well; it is a good thing that I am learning new things but sometimes I am not able to answer guests and that annoys me; experiencing new things is so much fun; working on night audit I am now sure I can deal with situations by myself; in the hotel industry we need to be flexible and to deal with unpredictable situations in order to earn more revenue; this Sunday there was a small surprise – my manager shared the tips with me, and I was not expecting that; The amount of money was not important because I felt my manager appreciated me – I was very happy with that.*

### Conclusions

This paper has clearly only scratched the surface of the debate around soft skills versus hard skills, and there is much more that could be done. Certainly, a body of knowledge could be developed around all the workplace diaries that are being completed across the globe. Lashley (1999, p. 184) warned that “[o]bjectives set by governmental, educational and industrial bodies suggest that future managers need to be reflective practitioners, and this issue will have to be addressed by hospitality educators”. This comment (made almost twenty years ago) has never been truer than now in 2018.

The ability to reflect on their experiences and then learn from them is a fundamental measure of “graduateness”, which is often related to or understood to be concerned with soft skills. This paper has considered the value of soft skills, placement and reflection during a hospitality student’s internship element of a hospitality programme (in this case in New Zealand), but we would suggest similar experiences are likely in other countries, although this exploratory work should clearly not be regarded as generalisable (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In the continued debate about hospitality management education, Baum (1990, p. 14) argues that his research found industry people saying: “give us a management trainee entrant who is well mannered, relates positively to guests and fellow staff, is appropriately presented and communicates effectively, and we will do the rest”. This suggests that soft skills are more important to the hospitality industry than technical skills, and

some ten years later Weber et al. (2009, p. 354) claimed that “most companies want their future managers to have the soft skills needed to be successful within their organisation’s environment”.

Lashley (2009, p. 348) somewhat controversially argued that “[e]mployers are rarely looking for a high level of competence in a wide range of hard technical skills”. Given the overwhelming evidence of the importance of soft skills for hospitality graduates, one might ask why institutions continue to focus so heavily on teaching the technical aspects of our business. Sisson and Adams (2013, p. 144) suggest that perhaps it is because “hard competencies are often easier to define, teach, and assess”. One dissenting voice in all this comes from Hurrell and Scholarios (2014, p. 54), who point out that

low-wage, non-professional service occupations are especially reliant on “people skills” rather than technical or abstract reasoning skills. This is most noticeable for customer-facing employees in interactive services, where service quality has been closely linked to social skills.

Does this mean that hospitality educators focus on soft skills because they cannot teach hard skills? Or because the students cannot cope? Or are hospitality educators setting students up for a low-wage lifetime? We would not agree with that viewpoint, but it is perhaps one we need to be able to argue against with supporting research evidence.

To finish on a more positive note, Tse (2010, p. 261) pointed out that

[g]eneric skills are skills applicable in any industry and not specific to the hospitality industry; therefore generic skills are valuable to a student’s entire future career. These points should be explained to students before they commence their placement and reinforced after the placement, so they are conscious of their personal growth.

In other words, even if a hospitality student decides not to continue in the industry, those soft skills will still stand them in very good stead.

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