

# The Efficiency of Hospitality Experiential Education from Hotel Industry Perspectives

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The aim of this study is to review experiential learning in hospitality education through its implementation and also to explore industry perceptions, regarding the effectiveness of the adopted experiential learning methods. There are many focus group discussions that have been conducted amongst the hotel industry. A qualitative method for the hospitality industry professionals has been used in this research. Describing the meanings of central themes in the life of the subjects is what the qualitative research interview seeks to do. According to this research, understanding what the interviewees have to say is the main task at the interview stage. This study also reveals wide utilisation of experiential learning activities in hospitality education. Generally, it is said that experiential learning is more effective than traditional classroom learning in accordance to lectures, it is also believed that the hospitality industry with experiential learning activities is being effectively implemented. The researchers give many suggestions in this paper to provide support to hospitality educators to introduce ways to improve the utilisation of experiential learning methods to facilitate student learning.

**Key words:** Effectiveness, Hospitality, Experiential Learning, Academic, Industry Perspective.

## Introduction

Education is a developing industry in which Malaysia has been receiving acknowledgment as a trusted study destination in the region (Jomo, 2019). There is a very big difference between students entering institutions of higher education at present compared to those of the previous generations (Levine, 2018). A variety of higher education programs, as well as professional

and specialised skill courses, are being offered by the education sector at comparative prices and that are of excellent quality (M. Deldeniya, A. Khatibi, & S. F. Azam, 2018, Hamilton et al., 2018). The Malaysian government has created policies to encourage involvement of public and private higher education institutions in improving the provision of its tertiary education – with ambitions for Malaysia to become a regional education hub in South East Asia (V. M. Deldeniya, A. Khatibi, & S. F. Azam, 2018; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). In the increasingly competitive environment for higher education, the marketing of programs to attract students to vocationally-orientated degrees has taken on greater importance; with education leaders and teaching staff being responsible for the task of bridging the gap between knowledge and practical application (Katukurunda, Khatibi, & Azam, 2018, Lakes & Donovan, 2018, Reimers & Chung, 2019).

In general, every child in the country has been provided with eleven years of basic education under the Malaysian education system. Both public and privately funded educational institutions exist at all levels within the national educational system. The educational structure of 6-3-2 consists of six years of primary education, three years of lower secondary education, and two years of upper secondary education in the public schools. The students have unified public examinations at the end of primary (UPSR), lower secondary (PMR) and upper secondary levels (SPM). Malaysia has been striving towards universal primary and secondary education since gaining independence (Wan, 2018).

Reference can be made under the term “experiential learning” to service learning, internships, applied projects, and less-structured experiences (which can also be reflected upon and assessed from learning stand point) (Wolmarans, 2006).

Experiential learning is a useful educational tool to make a good transformation of the learning experience to extend beyond the traditional classroom, which is used for tourism and hospitality (Edelhein & Ueda, 2007). Students through experiential learning are able to learn more about their chosen vocation through real world experience which offers more advantages outside of ordinary traditional classroom instructions (Johnson et al., 2016). Students in experiential learning learn through direct hands-on action or activity, carrying that specific experience into future experiences (Blinck, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007), and that is what makes experiential learning an interaction learning by doing method (Kemeny, Boettcher, DeShon, & Stevens, 2006). It is clear that research on experiential learning in this area of education is an important and neglected research area as the tourism industry becomes more complex (Falk, Ballantyne, Pocker, & Benckendorff, 2012), whereas future employers also expect non-vocational skills such as interpersonal skills, reflection and analysis (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1999). It is proven that the idea of learning through experience is not new by the integration of the experiential learning element into the curriculum of many leading tourism and hospitality programs (Lee, 2008).



The tourism and hospitality industry is one of the fastest growing sectors within the economy in many countries (Jack, Stansbie, & Sciarini, 2017). As a result, a wide diversity of different careers with a special work force exists which makes human resource management in this industry more tangled (Liu & Wall, 2006). Hospitality education is defined by Markovic as a multidisciplinary field, combining the perspectives of many disciplines (especially found in social sciences) for practice and application in the hospitality and tourism industry. Experiential learning is currently integrated into the curriculum of many leading tourism and hospitality programs (Lee, 2008).

The hotel industry is clearly noted to play a major role in supporting Malaysian tourism (Salleh, Abdul Hamid, Hashim, & Omain, 2010). Economies of many countries and cities such as Egypt, Greece, Mauritius, Seychelles, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Dubai and Las Vegas heavily depend on the income from their tourism activities (Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1995). In addition, experiential learning initiatives have grown within programs with the purpose of building a bridge that links experience and learning (Conradie, 2012).

A great opportunity is now available in Malaysia to join college and university. There are many ways for university students to experience what they have learned in classrooms, which is through internships. Positive impacts have been noticed on the evolution of the hospitality industry by the students' applications of their knowledge to the industry (Birasnav, 2014). According to Dewey (1938) and other experiential education theorists (Edward & Usher, 2002; Itin, 1999; A.Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2009) the realisation of deeper levels of learning happens when the participant lays the foundation for education in experience, affording opportunities for active reflection. A study by Basaran (2016) highlighted that the misconnection between the real skills of students and the needs and expectations of the industry is the main cause of poor retention rates among graduates in hospitality.

While experiential learning is a connotation translating through many academic fields and cultures, it is taking on greater importance in the hospitality and tourism management industries because of its emergence as a learning development tool (Stansbie, Nash, & Chang, 2016). The case concerning industry skill shortages and support from higher education graduates led to an additional study by Baum, Ma and Payea (2013) – to address the skills debate within the hospitality industry. In particular when investigating these benefits further, it is obvious that experience becomes more valuable when the career choice of the students is supported by a need for sound vocational training, such as the field of HTM (Stansbie & Nash, 2016). The experiential training theory argues that the behaviour of people is a result of what they grasp from their experience and their meanings. From here, by providing experience via training, there can be a change in people's performance (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). This research will highlight the perception of hospitality industry players and the faculty regarding experiential learning, as being practiced by one hospitality school. The goal of this research is to study the

perception of hospitality experiential learning on student achievements, and also to study the relationship between experiential learning and industry perception.

## Literature Review

### *Experiential Education and Experiential Learning*

The basic feature of experiential learning is quite well understood and agreed upon (Breuning, 2005). A review of the expressions ‘experiential education’ and ‘experiential learning’ shows that they are often used interchangeably in reference to the process of gaining knowledge through practise (D.A. Kolb, 1976, D. A. Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). However, there have been attempts to define each expression in a way that is more precise. Such as the Association of Experiential Education (1994:1 cited in (Itin, 1999)) who claims that “Experiential Education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experience”. On the other hand, Chickering (1977) states that “experiential learning occurs when changes in judgments, feelings, knowledge or skill result for a particular person from living through an event or events”. Furthermore, other authors (Itin, 1999) outline differences between experiential education and experiential learning, by claiming that they are different constructs; if conceptualised correctly, allow for broader discussions and clearer communication that should ease professional understanding based on identified distinctions.

Despite these attempts, there appears to be little separation according the key terms and purpose in reality (Abrams, 1988). Moreover, the similarities reveal that they both address behavioural change as a direct result of experience, describing an alternative approach to traditional didactic education. Thus, since the similarities appear to be much greater than their differences, the terms are treated as one collective, interchangeable definition (Andersen & Young, 1995). Terminology in the experiential education field is usually blurred with experiential learning. Experiential learning refers to the real process that the learner works through to learn from or make meaning from an experience. Experiential learning is the process of learning through reflection on doing, the emphasis is on the critical reflection and processing of the experience (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Jordi, 2011).

Regarding the development of experiential learning, David Kolb is probably the most influential recent theorist, enduring from the earlier work of theorists, such as Freire and Mezeiro, who stressed the processing and critical reflection of experience being the heart of learning (Kelly, 1997). Kolb defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience”, and emphasises the learning that happens when content meets experience (Corbett, 2005). Kolb utilised a learning cycle model to explain his theory. The model contains four stages in the process: concrete experience, reflective observation or critical reflection (where the learner asks questions about the experience based on past experiences), abstract conceptualisation (where the learner seeks to find answers to the

questions, makes generalisations, draws conclusions), and active experimentation (where the learner puts the new hypotheses or conclusions to test, which leads to more experiences). As with any learning cycle, it can be entered at any phase, but when utilised consciously in teaching, it usually starts with the concrete experience (Abdulwahed & Nagy, 2009; Prasadini, Abd Hamid, Khatibi, & Azam, 2018).

### ***Experiential Hospitality Learning and Education***

Hotel management education in comparison with other academic programs, demand both academic and vocational curriculum contents, to bridge educational settings with actual experience in the industry (Milman, 2017). The provision of accreditation and corresponding recognition supplies better opportunities and advancement in the field of hospitality and tourism to students (Nor & Khairudin, 2009). It is astonishing to know that insufficient research has been given to student perceptions towards their future career, when the students are the main direct contacts to the hospitality and tourism education, as well as the future of tourism industry labour. Moreover, the increase of hospitality and tourism education is still perceived as vague with career tracks that are not clearly defined – stakeholders have found inadequacy in the curriculum itself to correspond with industry needs (Sarker, 2014). Many aspects of the hospitality and tourism education have been highlighted that mainly require further enhancement and research.

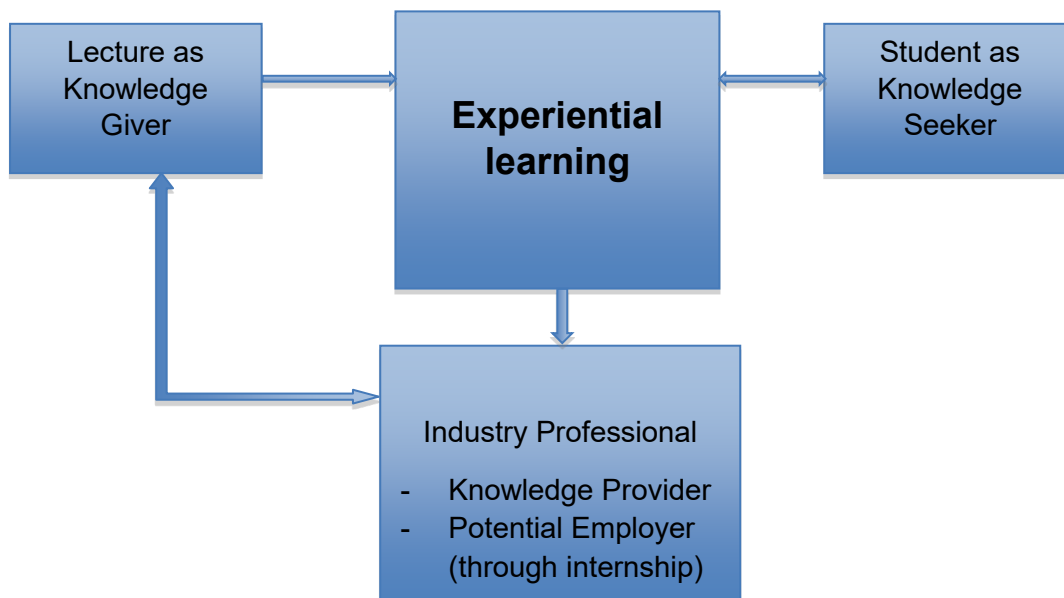
Itin (1999) stated that the nature of experiential learning was well understood and agreed upon. A review of the terms ‘experiential education’ and ‘experiential learning’ show their interchangeable use in reference to the process of learning through practice (D. A. Kolb, 1976, Kraft, 1986). Henry (1989) suggested eight different approaches to experiential learning which include project work, problem based, independent learning, personal development, action learning, prior learning, activity based, and placement. Itin (1999) defined ‘experiential education’ as the process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experience. Another definition (Chickering, 1977) was that “experiential learning occurs when changes in judgments, feelings, knowledge or skill result for a particular person from living through an event or events”.

Training employees results in very big advantages such as operational improvement, cost reduction in performances, raised customer satisfaction, decreased employee anxiety over their working time, induction of co-operational relationship between staff, reduction in performance problems, increased service quality, and many others (Hayes & Ninemeier, 2009). Therefore, increasing profitability of an organisation is the tangible result of all mentioned benefits. Furthermore, Itin (1999) outlined the distinctions between “experiential education” and “experiential learning” through defining them as being of different constructs and if conceptualised correctly, identified distinctions would permit for wider discussions and clearer communication to make professional understanding much easier.

The similarities between them show that both terms address behavioural change as a direct result of experience and prescribe an alternative approach to traditional didactic education. Therefore, the terms are treated as one collective, interchangeable definition as the similarities appear to be far greater than the differences (Cushion et al., 2010). To substantiate this point, another strong advocate for experiential learning is the American psychologist Carl Rogers who pioneered the Humanistic approach to Psychology in the 1950s. His work focuses on the existence of two types of learning; cognitive (referred to by Rogers as meaningless) and experiential. In his research, Rogers borders many qualities afforded by experiential learning, focusing on addressing the needs and wants of the learner (Froh, 2004; Rogers, 1959; Zaqar, Khatibi, Azam, & Tham, 2019a, 2019b).

Based on the reviews of the current research, various aspects of the hospitality and tourism education have certainly been highlighted and as such, require further enhancement and research. Therefore, this study is determined to understand the perception of international students towards hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia. It has identified the competitive advantage that Malaysia holds to compete with other education hubs offering hospitality and tourism education. Motivational factors that influence international student decisions in selecting Malaysia as the destination for hospitality and tourism education allows for a better understanding of the existing curriculum from an international estimation.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Frameworks (Source: Kozak, 1999)



## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

For this particular study, the researchers have chosen to implement a qualitative research method by carrying out interviews with various correspondents that related to the research, those who have gained experienced in experiential learning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, O'Brien, 1998). The qualitative research method will allow the researchers to directly interview the correspondents and understand their side of the experience and the exposure that they have undergone through their time of experiential learning. A qualitative approach serves as a good test of whether you will make insightful constructionist researchers by determining whether the researchers can make out the extraordinary features in an otherwise ordinary life (Silverman, 2013).

To conduct the study, the researchers selected the correspondents randomly and put them in groups to partake in the interview. The group of respondents partaking in the interview ranged from varying ages and periods during their experience in hospitality industry. To interview the industry players, the researchers firstly gathered the contact numbers of the respondents that they wished to interview (Stuart, 2002). The respondents were informed regarding the purpose of the study and the requirements for the interview (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). In total, five questions were given to the respondents and the researchers recorded all the information. They handed out two sets of question: one specifically for the industry players. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Findings and Data Analysis**

### ***Interview Questions***

#### ***Industry***

The above details are strictly for statistical purposes only. The interviewee will remain as anonymous.

#### **1. What is your opinion towards students from hospitality and tourism course?**

*“Up to the students because they have chosen the course. Hospitality and tourism are a very wide scope. Malaysia also is an upcoming tourism spot, so for those who are taking this course is also a plus point for them. But it is going to be based on the interest, if they have interest to enrol themselves in these courses, they should assert themselves”.*



*“In my general opinion, student’s learning from university doesn’t develop common sense and most of the time I look forward to good attitude”.*

**2. How effective is the understanding and knowledge from the students of the tasks and practices performed by industry professionals?**

*“We can assess during their internship period. Because study during lecture and go for internship is two different parts. Study is theoretical based but coming towards internships is totally different. But during internship also, they should be exposed into administration because they will always be put under operation. But in hotel from front of the house is nice however, back of the house is different. But still, it depends on students, how passion they are into hospitality”.*

*“To be effective, students need to learn the know-how. Not just by doing it, but also to practice. Through practice, they can know whether it is effective or not”.*

**3. Is it possible for the industry to accept fresh graduates if the education system were change to experiential learning compared to the previous education system, which is theory learning?**

*“Both is important, theoretical is more towards classroom based or lecture based, but it is still important. Maybe they should put internship twice in a university, not only by the end of their studies but also during middle of their study, before they go for graduation”.*

*“Yes, it’s possible, because what we are doing now is actually what they are teaching in university. University also knows focuses more experiential learning and critical thinking which is beneficial towards students in the future”.*

**4. Does the hospitality experiential learning provide an experience that is beneficial to your organisation?**

*“Yes, because hotel usually when students come for internships if they are good, we can accommodate them as management trainee where we will expose them in departments. Management trainee is a program where we absorb them and placed them into selected department, depending on what interest they have.*



*Example, if they are interested in Human Resources Management, we can place them into Sales, F&B, then finally to HR Department”.*

*“Yes, because nowadays people are afraid to expose their talent because of the criteria needed in an organisation. However, they can enhance themselves little by little if they involve themselves in the industry”.*

##### **5. How often does your organisation manages to hire interns as permanent staff?**

*“Yes, here we hire interns. Recently, we also hired an intern absorb into kitchen as a commie because she studied regarding pastry”.*

*“In my opinion, my organisation is open for intern to join, however, they tend to demand for something that they have not earned or learned by themselves. They should prove their capability first, to prove that they are worthy before they start to demand for something”.*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### ***Summary of Thematic Analysis***

Generally, the respondents who participated in the interview session were industry professionals from selected hotels. The data was transcribed using the response given by respondents. The researchers used different themes as categories based on the response that the researchers received. Conversely, the first theme for industry professional is job opportunity. Most of the respondents stated that the company did absorb intern students as permanent staff in the organisation. Education system is categorised as the second theme. Most of the respondents think that both education systems, theoretical based and practical based learning, are important for the students.

The collected data helped in getting an understanding of the importance of experiential learning in hospitality and tourism courses. The implication and ways used in determining and enhancing experiential learning in hospitality and tourism course. Experiential learning is the authentic process the learner works through to learn from, or make meaning from, an experience. Experiential learning is learning through reflection on doing, the emphasis is on the critical reflection and processing of the experience. Experiential learning helps students become full partners and collaborators in their personal learning journey and helps them undertake responsibility for their own decisions. There is a relationship between experiential learning and the course itself.



### ***Conclusion***

Students must be careful about details, as it is not possible to learn everything in classes due to unpredictable cases and problems. An internship is a good opportunity for students to verify their knowledge with real work, something that happens every day in hotels and adjusting university courses according to hotel needs based on feedbacks. Although the industry professionals have discussed the curriculum aspects for improvement but then the theory and knowledge are not enough to perform in the industry. For instance, emergency cases or fussy customers cannot handle, unless students have gained experience about it and overcome the problem by themselves. Moreover, one-day exposure to the industry in housekeeping and front office subject is also not sufficient, as they cannot obtain anything in one day. Though, for the one-day they will only get the chance to observe and explore the hotel. The practical classes in the mock hotel did not give the real experience as to what the industry gives. Therefore, experiential learning should be increased in the hospitality and tourism management course to produce comprehensive graduates with knowledge, skills and most notably experience that the industry considers in employing fresh graduates.

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